





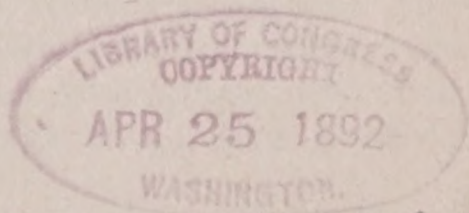
THE HEAD OF THE FIRM

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BY

MRS. J. H. RIDDELL

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THE HEAD OF THE FIRM.

CHAPTER I.

“IF TIMOTHY FERMOY.”

Whit-Monday, bright, brilliant — fine as fine could be! From the London excursionist's point of view an ideal Whit-Monday!

A scorching sun to—in his own artless phrase—“bite his back,” a bitter east wind to temper the heat, dust enough to render a pause at each favorite wayside tavern not merely excusable but necessary, plenty of company in brakes, wagonettes, spring carts, and even costers' barrows to beguile the long way with shout and laughter, song and repartee; the unearthly noise drawn from an agonized cornopean, or the gay and festive tones of some wheezy concertina lightly touched by the funny gentleman indispensable to each party, who is capable, in his own opinion and that of his friends, of adorning any circle, and meanwhile kindly delights his own.

Never, surely, was there a finer Whit-Monday, which, after all, is *the* holiday of the year to Londoners, the day thought of, looked forward to, and back upon with feelings of intense satisfaction.

On the especial Whit-Monday when this story opens people had poured out of town in their thousands and hundreds of thousands. Every road leading to any place of popular resort was alive with excursionists.

At the railway termini trains filled with happy, eager men and women and children were despatched to the accompaniment of waving handkerchiefs, hearty cheers, and lusty choruses. The river steamboats were crowded with passengers. London proper was a city of the dead. Shops and offices were closed. It was possible to walk down the middle of Fleet Street and Cheapside ; the teeming life of England's metropolis had temporarily forsaken London and left the great city to silence and solitude. Even in the suburbs there prevailed a quiet foreign to neighborhoods in which tradesmen's carts usually flashed about like meteors, dashing round corners and putting timid ladies and elderly gentlemen in terror of their lives.

Noon had come and gone. It was that usually busy hour when working-class fashion ordains there shall be much running to and from adjacent bars ; when children are despatched with jugs and bottles for a liquor which appears more to be desired than water in the desert by the arid throats of an industrial population ; but on that fine Whit-Monday there seemed no children left in London to run with two pennies or four pennies clasped tight in their little hands for pints or pots or any measure whatsoever.

The children were out of town and the pennies too. The accustomed taverns were deserted in favor of more rural houses, where beer could be scarcely drawn fast enough to assuage the thirst of London on this its gigantic holiday.

In a back street of Battersea not one human being was astir. A dog with a rusty coat and a mere wisp of a tail was investigating the state of the gutters ; on a doorstep a cat sat in the sun waiting either for the return of her family or such time as the spirit might move her to start on some marauding expedition ; at one first-floor window a blackbird with ruffled feathers stood silent on the floor of his cage, thinking, it might be, of the woodland home he would never see again ; on some of the sills protected by liliputian railings or

greater triumphs of artistic skill, which probably gave more pleasure to their owners than deer park or chase ever conferred on a lord of the soil, bloomed gay flowers that seemed to shrink and shiver as the east wind swirled along, the silence as wonderful, and the sense of utter desolation more wonderful still.

In the heart of a populous city the absence of all signs of life affects the imagination with a deeper feeling of loneliness than any expanse of desert, or wild waste of moorland, or desolate stretch of seashore when the waves are receding from it and night is drawing slowly on.

About half way up this street, which was a thoroughfare, there turned another, which was a *cul de sac*, being fenced in at the end by a high wooden paling that the bad boys of the neighborhood were always trying to climb, and where they were always coming ignominiously to grief.

Whether the builder of this short street lost heart, or the mortgagees prematurely foreclosed, it is difficult to say, but one thing is certain, viz., that the "snug little estate fully ripe" (*vide* advertisement) was not developed to its full extent.

After the enterprising leaseholder had erected twelve six-roomed houses, more like each other than peas in a pod, on one side of the road, and twelve similarly attractive residences on the other, he broke out into a double-fronted mansion, and then fled either to the bankruptcy court or to yet riper plots, leaving eligible sites for eight dwellings on the left and six on the right-hand side vacant for some one more sanguine or possessed of a larger credit than himself to utilize.

In the neighborhood of Battersea vacant spaces are not long permitted to lie idle; therefore one was without delay converted into a playground for the juvenile inhabitants, and a corner where their elders beat their mats and carpets, while the tenant of the palatial mansion which boasted a window on each side of

the front-door promptly proceeded to erect a lean-to against the gable of his house and boundary wall of his small yard.

The cost of this shed did not run into much money. A few lengths of "quartering," a good "deal" in six-foot egg-chests, an equally admirable bargain in a lot of hemp carpeting, faded but sound, a few pounds of nails, some gallons of gas tar, half a yard of Thames gravel, a couple of second-hand window-sashes, and behold! there spring like magic from the earth an impromptu green-grocer's shop and stable, both capable of being locked up at night, and both "as snug as snug could be."

When the landlord's agent saw these architectural triumphs he accepted the position in a proper spirit and raised the rent.

It was the only thing he could well do, for the ingenious tenant was possessed of a strong will, a deep hoarse voice, and a lordly temper, and though he acquiesced in the justice of paying a trifle for the use of the land, would have resented and resisted any attempt to interfere with the annex of which he himself had been the designer and builder.

All in good time he worked up a "round." There are men in London who make a living by getting together a connection and then selling it. He was but a beginner—a mere tyro—with only a set of weights and scales, a few sacks, bushel and half-bushel baskets, a barrow donkey and old set of harness, yet for these items, his few customers, and the makeshift shed he ere long received thirty pounds current coin of the realm, with which he departed to work up another and better business elsewhere.

On that bright Whit-Monday, though the double-fronted house was closely shut up, the door of the shop stood open.

Passing from the street bright with sunshine into the rude shed was like going from the light of day into some dark cool grotto, but when once his eyes be-

came accustomed to the gloom a person could see objects even at the extreme rear clearly enough.

In its way the store was well stocked. If it contained nothing rich or rare there were plenty of those articles which in such a neighborhood are always in request.

Coal and coke, of course, with bundle-wood and a few wheels, though the latter did not find much favor; bins half full of potatoes; dried herbs suspended from the roof, breathing forth, even in death, a pleasant fragrance; Spanish onions were there in sieves, and spring onions in bundles; on a board sloping toward the window were ranged vessels filled with small salad; while radishes, round French breakfast and long red, blushed crimson amid water-cresses plucked fresh that morning from streams which trickled slowly to the Wandle.

There were not wanting signs either to prove that a considerable amount of perishable stock had been recently disposed of.

Half-bushel and bushel baskets, evidently not long previously full of green stuff, stood piled up empty. One solitary orange marked the spot whence a goodly company of its fellows had disappeared; not a nut, whether Barcelona, Brazil, or cocoa, was to be seen; only half a dozen shrivelled and wizened apples were left at the bottom of a capacious basket; quarts of unripe gooseberries had gone to provide the necessary pudding or pie accounted an essential dish in a Whit-Sunday dinner; only two stone bottles of ginger-beer, at a penny apiece, kept each other company, and not a lemon could have been purchased, even in exchange for sixpence current coin of the realm!

Since the previous Friday trade had apparently prospered in Field Prospect, as the stunted street was called. Indeed anyone versed in the signs which indicate failure or success might have gathered at a glance that trade had been good for a sufficiently long time to justify the proprietor of such an establishment

“going out” on Whit-Monday with a clear conscience, a full purse, and a merry heart.

Nevertheless the owner had not gone out. Instead she sat among her empty baskets on an inverted bushel measure, knitting a prosaic stocking, and as she knit she sang, not joyously, or yet with the sad song of the robin when autumn leaves are falling, and the most mournful season of the year preaches to us of fading life and coming death, but softly, as one who tells some pleasing, melancholy tale such as youth delights in, merely because youth fails to realize that the melancholy may chance to be all its own when the delight has departed.

She, the owner, the singer, was young, just two-and-twenty, with most of life presumably before, and certainly a vast amount of sad experience behind her.

Was she pretty? If her features were analyzed, “No.” If any one took her face on a whole, “Yes,” and much more.

Once her hair had been red—not the brilliant orange scarlet that remains unchanged till time powders it with snow—but the deeper, darker, richer red that mellows into a lustrous brown flecked with gold as the light shifts and changes upon it. Her skin was fair, with the exceeding fairness that often accompanies hair such as hers.

Not all the long exposure to sun and rain, not the piercing north wind or the bitter east had as yet been able to mar its pure white. She was much freckled, and her hands were browned, but in other respects she might have been sitting at ease all her life, so delicate was her complexion. Curling naturally, her wavy hair wandered in soft little ripples over a forehead which might have been thought somewhat too broad for beauty; her mouth was large, and her nose belonged to no recognized order, yet looking in that frank face, lit up with such wonderful eyes, who could suspend admiration in order to criticise the other features.

Those eyes were the glory of the girl's face—kind, good, faithful eyes, soft and tender, of that clear, limpid brown which is so seldom seen after early childhood. Large were they too, and loving—not merry, but still with a smile playing at hide-and-seek in their depths, ready to leap out at the faintest pretext. She had dark eyebrows, and long, dark lashes; white, even teeth, and a round, pretty chin; but when all which could be said about her was said, it was to her eyes every one returned, eyes that looked as a clear, deep river looks when the sun is shining on it—eyes that were indeed but windows through which the beholder might gaze straight down into a nature, strong, unselfish, truthful, and loving.

And yet she dwelt in that mean street, and made her living in that rough shed.

Yes; for we are rightly taught it is not alone in king's palaces God's elect are to be found.

The smallest room, or straitest of earth's narrow places is wide enough and large enough to contain a lovely spirit, a meek and lowly heart.

I have said she sang, but it was only as one might play with the soft pedal so much down that the melody heard seemed scarce the echo of an air.

Yet it was a pretty old tune, with fine flowing words, fit to be flung to the winds on a hillside, or lustily trolled in fields where the swath, just cut, lay thick, and mowers, sharpening their scythes, paused to listen, and then took up the breezy chorus—true of and for all time :

“ While the sun shines make hay,
While the sun shines make hay,
For ye cannot expect in December
To gather the blossoms of May.”

Gently the knitting-needles clicked—a not unmusical accompaniment—then this girl's ball of worsted fell to the ground and she stooped to pick it up, ceasing her lay.

When she resumed her work she sang once more, but this time a mere commonplace ditty, which perhaps to her young heart seemed pleasingly sentimental.

“Only the old, old story
Whispered in mine ear,
Above was the summer glory
Around the green wheat in ear.

“High in the cloudless heaven
The lark sang loud and clear,
And we were alone together—
I—and my lover dear.

“Only as old a story
As that which was whispered then——”

At which supreme point her voice trailed off into silence, and the rose-tints mantled in her cheeks while she rose to greet a man who stepped across the threshold and threaded his way through the baskets after the fashion of one accustomed to such exercise.

“So you are not holiday-making, Aileen?” he said.

“Indeed, no, Mr. Philip,” she answered, in a soft, even voice, which held a charm in its tones; “I went holiday-making once on Whit-Monday, and I never want to go again. Won’t you be pleased to sit down, sir,” and she indicated the bushel measure, which was the best apology for a chair the shed boasted.

“Thank you, I will find a seat for myself,” he answered, turning a basket bottom upward. “And you are all alone?”

“All alone, sir. They have gone, every one of them, to Hampton Court.”

“I am glad of that, for I want to speak to you.”

Unmistakably a gentleman, equally unmistakably the young fellow was not a lover—not Aileen’s, at all events.

His manner to her, though perfectly friendly, more than friendly indeed—familiar—was entirely innocent of even that harmless admiration a man of any rank

may feel for a pretty girl in whatsoever station it may have pleased God to place her.

Aileen's manner also, while equally unembarrassed, was that of an inferior toward a superior—of one who felt there lay so broad a gulf of caste between them that she could speak quite freely and naturally without the slightest fear of misconception.

That they knew each other very well—most intimately, indeed—was beyond doubt. Had she been his foster sister the sympathy and understanding between the curiously assorted pair could not have seemed greater.

There was not the slightest awkwardness in their intercourse, no consciousness on either side, as, in the most natural and simple way possible, he asked:

“Are you not doing so well as you were, Aileen?”

“I am doing a good trade, Mr. Philip,” the girl answered, “but I do not get a bit forward—sometimes I think I never shall.”

“Why?” When two people understand each other few words suffice.

“It is this way, sir: whatever I make goes out as fast as I can get it. We might all be comfortable and happy as the day is long, but we are nothing of the sort. I am sure the way things are, home is a misery.”

“So bad as that?”

“Yes, as bad as that. I have been thinking about it all morning and can see no light anywhere. Maybe it is wrong of me to be troubling you after your goodness in helping me to buy this good round, but——”

With a gesture the young man deprecated both the apology and the gratitude.

“I wish it had been in my power to do more for you,” he said.

“I know that, Mr. Philip, well, though you have done more for me than I can ever thank you enough for.”

“The round is a good round,” she went on, revert-

ing to the original question; "the customers pay regularly and none ask for credit unless they are out of work, and when they get in again bring their money as fast as they can, poor creatures. No, it is not that, and I should not so much mind it all being spent if there were ever an hour's peace or quiet. As much will be tossed away to-day as ought to keep the house for weeks, and it is the same always. Sometimes I feel I could walk out and never come back again. It is wrong, I dare say, I know it is wrong, but I can't help it."

"I have always thought," said the young man, "you would be happier in a situation. If you were maid to some nice elderly lady——"

"I'd ask nothing better, Mr. Philip, but then no wages I could ask would serve to maintain them here. No, I must stop where I am as I am. Who would see to them if I went away? They would sell the business in a week and live on the best till all the money was gone, and then end in the workhouse likely as not. No, I must stay, I must——" and she stopped suddenly.

"Do you dislike the business, Aileen?"

"No, sir; why should I dislike what buys us food and clothes and firing, and keeps a roof over us? What breaks my heart is that everything is so miserable when it might be so different. The boys are growing up rough and rude and wild, and what can I do for them? Mrs. Fermoy is vexed if I speak, she thinks they can do no wrong. There is not one of them but Jack of the least help. Peter would not be so bad if someone would show him a good example; but he is always copying Dick—smoking, swearing, drinking, and idling about the streets."

"Nothing can be done for them, I suppose?"

"Nothing, sir; and I take shame to have said as much as I have; but there is no one except yourself that I can speak a word to, and my heart is so full and sore sometimes."

Poor girl ! ”

“ Don’t, Mr. Philip, don’t, please, or you will make me cry, and what would be the use of that ? ”

“ Not much, indeed. Tell me, is Mr. Parkyn still with you ? ”

“ He is, and I wish he was anywhere else. ”

“ Has he gone to Hampton Court ? ”

“ He ! sir ; gone with our party, do you mean ? He is far too grand for that, and I don’t blame him either. For all he lodges with Mrs. Fermoy, Jack says he has seen him on the top of a four-in-hand among a lot of gentlemen. No, he went off early, all by himself, in a gray dust-coat, with field-glasses hung round him. ”

“ What is he ? ”

“ A betting man, I think. I am told they are one day up and another down ; but whether he is up or down I am greatly afraid Mr. Parkyn is not much good. ”

“ I saw your stepmother last week. ”

“ So she said, sir. ”

“ I was returning from Godalming, and at Clapham Junction she chanced to get into the compartment with me. We had some conversation, and she seemed annoyed that you do not marry Mr. Parkyn. ”

“ I know she is, I know it well. ”

“ She said she thought it would be an excellent match for you. ”

“ I am sure she does. ”

“ And you, Aileen ? ”

“ What about me, Mr. Philip ? ”

“ My mother would have wished to know all about you once, I think. ”

“ And indeed, sir, your mother’s son is welcome to know all about me now. Mr. Parkyn has never asked me to marry him, and never will. ”

“ But supposing he did. ”

“ I can’t suppose, Mr. Philip, that even a sham gentleman like him could ever want to have anything to do with a girl like me. ”

"Still, should the impossible happen?"

"I'd say, 'Thank you kindly, sir, but no'—for indeed I could never take to him."

"You are quite certain?"

"I am quite certain."

There ensued a pause, during which Aileen, with her pretty head bent down, tied and untied slip-knots in her worsted, while her friend Mr. Philip, taking out his pocketbook, searched among its contents till he found a scrap of newspaper.

"I think that ought to be seen to," he said, handing her the cutting.

"What does it mean, sir?" she asked, after she had read it over.

"I have not the faintest idea," he replied. "Is there anyone who would be likely to leave him money?"

The girl shook her head, then suddenly she seemed to see light. "Perhaps General Galvaine is dead, and has left him a legacy. He thought a lot of father."

"General Galvaine is not dead. I saw his name in the paper only this morning."

"Then I don't know what to think of this," said Aileen, and she read slowly down, as if to impress its sense on her mind, the following advertisement:

"If Timothy Fermoy, who, in the year 1860, kept a green-grocer's shop in Horton Street, Kensington, will apply to Messrs. Desborne & Son, Solicitors, Clock Lane, E. C., he will hear of something to his advantage."

"But my poor father is dead."

"Neither of us, Aileen, is likely to forget that. His daughter, however, is living."

"Yes, sir."

"And if this notice means that there would have been any money coming to him, it means most probably that there will be money coming to you. It may be, of course, that he is only wanted as having been witness to some deed; but in any case it would be right to call on these gentlemen and ascertain what the advertisement means. Shall I see them for you?"

I could not think of putting you to such trouble, Mr. Philip," answered the girl, in her soft, pleasant voice. "I must go to market in the morning and it is only a step across one of the bridges into the city."

The young man looked thoughtfully at her and then said: "Yes," not at all as agreeing to the "step across one of the bridges," but merely as regarding the advisability of a personal visit to Messrs. Desborne & Son.

"Had you not better lock this cutting up?"

"If you could tell me the lock that would keep anything fast here, I would be forever grateful to you, Mr. Philip."

"Do you mean to say your places are opened?"

"Dick has got a second key to my box and took five pounds out of it yesterday."

"This is terrible, and I have not much that I can lend you."

"I don't want you to lend me a penny, thank you, sir. There is an old woman in the market always lets me have what I need when I am short, only it is constantly like beginning over again."

"Perhaps I had better write down Messrs. Desbornes' address for you and tear up this advertisement."

"I can put it away, thank you, where nobody will ever think of looking."

"Where is that?"

"In my Bible, Mr. Philip."

CHAPTER II.

IN THE BOROUGH MARKET.

Early the next morning Jack and Aileen started for the market. It is a long distance from Battersea to the Borough, but they were well accustomed to the road, they and their smart little black donkey, Parole, which both girl and boy fondly believed to be the best fed, best harnessed, best groomed, best housed, and fastest goer in all London.

As the donkey trotted through streets quiet and empty, before the traffic of the day had begun, Jack talked about Hampton Court and what he saw there, and what a grand time they had, and of how they were obliged to walk up Kingston Hill, because the horses were tired ; and how some of the excursionists must needs go on the river and nearly got upset. Thousands of people, he said, went through the Palace ; the rooms were so full they could not get near the pictures. He liked the grounds best, and the Maze, he thought he would walk down there by himself one Sunday, or he might, with a suggestive look, take the train from Clapham ; it did not cost much.

"We will see what can be done, if you are a good boy," said Aileen ; "but, oh, Jack, how I am to make up that money Dick took I can't think. I was saving till the fruit came in, because you know how much we could have made last year about preserving time, and now every penny is gone, and I must borrow even for that we need this morning."

Jack had no comfort to offer. In its way the disaster was as great to this girl as the stoppage of a bank is

to a depositor. Five pounds, an immense capital, now cast to the four winds of heaven by Dick, the irreclaimable.

"He won't come back this while," observed the boy; but even this certainty did not prove a solace to Aileen.

If not at home he would be probably in some much worse place.

"Ned says he'll give him a good hiding," went on the boy, but still Aileen kept silence. She knew that medicine ought to have been administered many a year before, and felt doubtful as to the effect of it, or any other domestic drug likely to be administered, especially by Ned, who was as poor a moral doctor as any patient could desire to be under.

"Have you no money at all left, Ally?" asked Jack, when the long pause had become monotonous.

"Only a few shillings," she answered. "I gave all I had, except that five pounds, to your mother."

"Couldn't you have got some from Mr. Parkyn?"

"No," answered Aileen, so shortly that the lad cast about for some other subject of conversation.

There are times when if one thing goes wrong some other thing is sure to follow suit. Joy is sufficient to itself, but sorrow loves company, and it was for this reason probably that when Aileen made her way to Mrs. Jeckles's stand she found a total stranger in possession, who explained that the old lady had been taken bad on Sunday, that he was her nephew, and that his wife would stay in London "for a bit" to look after his aunt.

"What is the matter?" asked the girl.

"The doctor didn't rightly say, but my own notion is that it's a break up. She has been an uncommon active woman, but no woman can go on forever. It is what we must all come to."

With the sun shining on the tower of St. Mary Overie, which rose in its stately proportions so high above where they stood and the graves of hundreds

long dead close beside them, this general statement was not one easily controverted. Aileen, at all events, made no effort to prove Mrs. Jeckles's nephew in error.

She only spoke a few words of sympathy and turned away, wondering what she had better do under such unexpected circumstances.

The matter was pressing. She could not go back empty unless she wanted to risk her trade; she must try to get credit, a thing she had never done before, because credit is not a system of business which finds favor in the Borough Market.

There was only one man in it she knew sufficiently well to ask for even a few days' grace, and she did not feel at all certain that he would grant such a boon. However, the position had to be faced, and as there was no use in delaying her petition, Aileen walked round the flagged enclosure till she reached Mr. Plashet's stand.

Mr. Plashet was the antipodes of Mrs. Jeckles, over the whole of whose ample person "country" was writ large, and whose tongue betrayed her whenever she opened her mouth.

Mr. Plashet, on the contrary, stood a Londoner and gloried in the fact. To him there seemed no place like it, and no place within the bills of mortality or out of that boundary so charming as Southwark, and finally no place in Southwark so altogether desirable as the Borough Market and its environs.

He was a very shrewd man of business, but he did not therefore consider little vices to be despised. On the contrary, he thought many of them were to be preferred to virtues. There was a bar near at hand he much affected, where "Irish" of a peculiarly soft and mellow flavor could be obtained, as well as a glass of port wine no alderman need have refused.

Likewise there was a certain bar parlor, where a few friends often met in order to pass a convivial evening, in which he sang a good song with the best. Further, his admirers, who were numerous, affirmed that

he was an excellent judge of a play, that he knew who could be depended on to win the next billiard contest, that he was acquainted with those who gave him sure tips concerning equine favorites, and had certain information about noted pugilists and the man who would walk away with Doggett's coat and badge.

In a word, he was a paragon of learning, which perhaps accounted for the fact that in general company his manners left something to be desired. "Till you understood him," said his friends, "anyone might think him a little short"—a mark of great intellect doubtless, but one which had the disadvantage of occasionally causing him to be considered surly.

In person he was tall, thin, and haggard-looking, with straight light hair, sallow complexion, and a general effect as if he had for a long time been burning his candle at both ends, which possibly was the fact.

On that Whit-Tuesday morning he had a particular seedy appearance, while he talked to three other men who looked even more washed out than himself, notwithstanding their having evidently striven quite lately to "fix" such color as nature had vouchsafed them at the bar afore honorably mentioned.

One of these gentlemen wore a tall hat, white, with a mourning band round it, that seemed to have been in the wars, which he took off at intervals, surveyed, and then stuck jauntily on his head again, with a sigh and a smile, inspired probably by memories of the preceding evening's drive Londonward in company with a merry party.

When Aileen paused by Mr. Plashet's stand, that autocrat acknowledged her shy "good-morning, sir," with a nod that could not be considered promising.

She did not mind this very much, however, because she knew the good man's ways, but the strangers were a trial, and as she named the goods required and added "I'll bring what they come to next time," her voice shook a little.

Good or bad, Mr. Plashet took no notice of her

words. He refrained equally from saying "that will do" or "that will not do," "you can have what you want" or "you cannot," but took a short lounge into his crowded store with that lazy, swinging gait which passed among his admirers as the height of swelldom.

"Look alive, Jake," he said to a burly individual who was leaning against some sacks of potatoes piled one on top of another, that formed an appropriate background to the picture; but what Jake was to look alive about, Mr. Plashet did not condescend to explain. He only made a languid dive beneath his standing desk and came up with a long, thin book which he opened and then began to write.

Aileen waited. This was an experience quite out of her customary routine, yet she did not despair. No one knew better than she how odd the salesman could be, and she did not intend to meet a denial half-way.

"You went pleasuring yesterday, I suppose," said Mr. Plashet, at last, pausing in his occupation to make the remark.

"No, sir; but my money did," answered Aileen. The reply was simple enough, but the effect it produced was great.

All the men except Mr. Plashet, who smiled languidly, burst out laughing, the white-hatted individual placing his hands on his knees, and bending himself almost double in his mirth.

"Blest if that ain't a good one!" he exclaimed; "hanged if I know when I've heard a better bit. So your money took Scot's leave, did it, my dear?"

"Yes, it did," Aileen answered, shortly.

"Well, well, don't break your heart about it, there is more in the Bank of England—care killed a cat—though certainly history does not say when. Really, you are a very pretty young woman. What's your particular, darling?"

"I don't drink," was the reply.

"It's time you began, then; you'll never learn younger."

"I never intend to learn at all," retorted Aileen.

"Come, come, that's all very nice, but we know what it means."

"Mind what you are about, Johnston," interrupted Mr. Plashet, at this supreme moment.

"Eh! Did you speak?" said Mr. Johnston, with affected surprise.

"I did. I told you to mind what you are about. If you don't know a respectable girl when you see her, it is time you were taught."

"And who could teach me?" asked Mr. Johnston.

"I could, and I will," replied Mr. Plashet.

"Oh, you, we know all about you," returned Mr. Johnston; which phrase, regarded—as for some inscrutable reason it is by a certain class—as the very essence of wit, the three visitors had another explosion of mirth which effectually dispersed the gathering storm.

"No offence meant, miss, no offence taken, I hope," said the gentleman in the white hat, removing his head-gear and making an elaborate bow as he spoke.

"No offence taken," answered Aileen, with frank civility. "May I tell Jack to bring the baskets round, Mr. Plashet," she added, determined to bring matters to a point.

"Jake can take some of them to the car for you," answered the arbitrator of her destiny for that hour.

"Perish the thought," cried Mr. Johnston. "Here, Cox and Simonds, bear a hand!" and before anyone could say a word, the three gay spirits were racing over the pavement with two bushel measures, Mr. Cox and Mr. Johnston carrying one, and Mr. Johnston and Mr. Simonds the other, the white-hatted gentleman thus bearing a double burden, perhaps by way of expiation.

"Clear the course, clear the course!" he shouted, as they rushed excitedly on. "Keep out of the way or you'll get run over," and thus they reached the street, Mr. Plashet shouting after them, "Stole away! stole away!" followed by about a score of small lads

and a couple of indignant porters, who saw in anticipation their dues disappearing, and pursued with the intention of rescuing them by fair means or foul.

Aileen had stopped, but to speak a word of grateful thanks to Mr. Plashet, and followed close on the heels of her cavaliers.

Light of foot and unencumbered, she came up with them as they were crying aloud as with one voice, "Jack, Jack, Jack, Jack. Where the deuce are you, Jack? Who the deuce is Jack?"

"That is Jack on the other side, with the donkey cart," explained the donkey cart's owner.

"Have at him, then!" exclaimed Mr. Johnston, and at this word of command, the three warriors charged the crossing, as they had charged the market, bearing down all before them, and still pursued by the boys and the porters.

"Jack," said Aileen, "run with the baskets and sacks to Mr. Plashet—fast now! and I will look after the donkey."

"Not while your humble servant is here to command," observed Mr. Johnston, striking an attitude. "Will you oblige me," he added, addressing his following, "by leaving the coast clear. If you must admire, let it be from a suitable distance. Money is it? Oh, with pleasure, but really I am afraid I have nothing less than a five-pound note. Can you oblige me with change? No? Then proceed to Mr. Plashet——"

What he meant to say concerning Mr. Plashet, however, can only be conjectured, for at a sign from Aileen the porters had already departed.

"I fear me you tipped those miscreants," said Mr. Johnston, "instead of leaving me to deal with them. Well, policeman, and what do you think of it all?"

The policeman thus addressed did not answer. He only looked benignly over his stock at the three friends, Aileen, and the donkey, then said to the boys in a tone of authority, and with a side movement of his head:

"Come you, be off now."

"Yes; to your play or to your school," supplemented Mr. Johnston, "though I believe it is that terrible time called vacation. The future hopes of England," he added, waiving his hands toward the young imps, "raw material."

"Mighty raw," remarked his friend, Mr. Cox.

"They are what you were," replied Mr. Johnston, severely.

"Very like an epitaph that, isn't it?" was Mr. Cox's retort.

And so the foolish babble flew like chaff before the wind, while Aileen, after vainly essaying to assume control of Parole, stood a little apart waiting the arrival of her goods.

They came ere long, and were built so scientifically in the cart that the donkey had not, as Jack observed, "an ounce weight on his back," and to remedy which defect, as doubtless he considered it, Mr. Johnston, after resigning Parole's head to the boy, advanced toward Aileen and inquired if he might have the honor of handing her to her carriage.

"We shall walk," said the girl.

"Walk!" repeated Mr. Johnston, "angels and ministers of grace, where is the fairy godmother, where is the chariot, where the fairy steeds, where the gorgeous appalled menials, where the glass slippers, where, above all, the Prince?"

"That don't much signify, as he ain't here," observed his third friend, Mr. Simonds, candid as is the manner of friends.

"We will wish you good-morning, sir," remarked Aileen, with a glance which took in Cox and Simmonds as well as Mr. Johnston. "We have a long step to go, and the sooner we start the better."

"It always comes to this," observed Mr. Johnston; "as someone has correctly observed, 'we meet to part, like ships on the great sea,' a fine idea. Good-day, then, pretty brown eyes—may you sell your roots and

herbs to advantage, and keep a sunny place in thy memory, dearest, for yours, to command, T. Johnston."

"Now, gentlemen, right about face," and they ran back as they had come, only this time hand in hand, to the admiration of all beholders.

The policeman looked after them and then relaxed into a smile.

"Their tea was made too strong this morning," he observed, emphatically.

"They meant no harm," returned Aileen, who from her association with Messrs. Jack, Peter, and Dick, perfectly understood dark sayings as applied to 'common matters.

"I thought I might as well wait to see."

"I saw you did," said Aileen, who knew him; "thank you," and she emphasized her gratitude with that most useful and in certain circles, familiar form of currency, twopence.

The girl and boy walked on in perfect silence till Southwark Bridge Road was crossed, Parole stepping out as though he had pledged his word to put his very best foot foremost.

From time to time Jack glanced at his companion's face, but there was nothing to be gathered from its expression. He had never before seen her in a precisely similar mood, and unable to reconcile the amount of goods she had procured with such unusual preoccupation, he bethought him of a cause which might account for what he mentally called her dumps.

"Did those toffs vex you, Ally?" he asked.

She raised her head and looked at him in surprise. "No," she replied; "what made you think such a thing?"

"You are so deedy, and they were such queer chaps."

"They won't be so queer to-morrow, most likely. Yesterday isn't long gone, and they are not quite sober yet, and still full of their fun."

"Is that all?"

"That is all. They were in Mr. Plashet's when I got there, and began chaffing, and then nothing would serve them but to play at being porters."

"I see," said Jack, who did not see in the least, and did not believe either, having the usual suspiciousness of his sex when his own female belongings were in question.

"And they did not vex you?" with lingering incredulity.

"They did not; but I was vexed at having to go to Mr. Plashet."

"Why? He always serves you well."

"He does, but I had to ask him for credit."

"How was that? Would Mrs. Jeckles not lend you enough?"

"Mrs. Jeckles was not in the market, she is ill."

Jack whistled. "It is lucky you got credit anyhow," he remarked.

"It is, but I'll have to take good care of all the money we can scrape together to pay Mr. Plashet and have something for next market-day. As I told you, coming down, I must go into the city and may not get back home before you've finished your first round. Promise me you'll give nobody even sixpence, no matter what it is wanted for."

"Nobody'll get a farden out of me," said Jack, valiantly. "I suppose you mean I'm not to let mother have anything?"

"I mean that you are to keep whatever you take till I get home. It's not yours to give, and it is not mine either for that matter. It is Mr. Plashet's, so do what I tell you, like a dear lad."

"All right," he answered. "I say, Ally, lend me your bag to put the takings in."

She handed him a little chamois bag, such as small tradesmen who go often to the bank are in the habit of carrying. It contained but a few pence, out of which she kept three for travelling expenses.

"Is that all there is left?" queried the boy.

"That is all," she answered, and they walked on in silence, both sometimes in the horse-way, Aileen occasionally on the curb, but always close together and stepping out briskly to keep pace with Parole, who, after two days' rest, was fresh as a daisy, and indeed had, for very playfulness, kicked and shown his teeth when Mr. Johnston essayed to show how well he understood donkey weaknesses by pulling his ears.

They did not talk much after this. The traffic of the day had begun, and it is not easy to carry on a conversation when guiding a donkey-cart between vans and omnibuses, cabs and drags and private traps. Thus it happened that save for an occasional remark they traversed in silence Southwark, Holland and Stamford Streets, York Road, crossed Westminster Bridge Road, passed the south side of St. Thomas's Hospital, skirted the gardens of Lambeth Palace, and finally reached that point where in olden times the horse-ferry boats touched the Surrey side.

Then, just opposite the ancient gateway and St. Mary's Church, Aileen stopped and said, "I'll take the boat from here, Jack. You won't forget what I told you?"

"No fear," returned the boy.

"And you may just as well ride home. Your weight won't make any difference."

"No, he'll never feel it," which was perhaps more than Parole would have said; nevertheless, the arrangement was satisfactorily carried out, and as Aileen turned, before going down the steps, she saw Jack snugly ensconced among the baskets, and the donkey start gallantly off at a round trot for Battersea.

CHAPTER III.

DESBORNE AND SON.

A steamer was leaving Vauxhall Pier as Aileen put her penny through the pigeon-hole at Lambeth pay-office and received in return a ticket available at any of the six landing stages which end with that of the Old Swan.

It is cheap travelling and pleasant when the boats are not overcrowded. Of a winter's morning, with only two or three passengers on board and freedom to stand close by the funnel, it is as nice a way of getting into the city as any one need desire. How well London looks from the river. With what an easy, gliding movement the Archbishop's Palace is left behind and the great hospital and the Houses of Parliament passed, then under Westminster Bridge, and on beside the Victoria Embankment, till Somerset House is reached, and the dome of St. Paul's looms larger and nearer every second. A wonderful run for a penny with a fresh wind blowing off the Thames and picturesque barges going up with the tide, and the great warehouses below Blackfriars taking in or sending off cargoes of goods, with lighters lying at anchor all along Bankside, where the garden of Winchester House used to slope to the river, and the sun shining on scores of city churches and gilding their fanes anew!

Seated in one of the centre benches in the fore part of the steamboat, whither she had modestly taken up her quarters, careful not to intrude her humble personality upon people better dressed and apparently more prosperous, Aileen Fermoy looked at the spires

and wondered, as well she might, how many a person could count between Blackfriars and Old Swan Pier.

She knew nothing of the city history, or else what a tale she might have recited to herself as the boat swept down the river till at last it slackened speed, and stopped hard by the spot where Osborne took that adventurous leap for love which, in our degenerate times, one or two others have repeated for money.

Familiar as the Borough Market was to her, she had never even heard the true history (probably false) of the life and sudden death of old John Overs, the rich ferryman of London, showing how he lost his life by his own covetousness. And of his daughter Mary who caused the church of St. Mary Overie, Southwark, to be built, and of the building of London Bridge.

Nor in her stock of old ballads had the nurse's song :

“ London Bridge is broken down,
Dance over my Lady Lea,
London Bridge is broken down,
With a gay lady”—

dear to the hearts of children who joined in the chorus with their young voices and kept time to its music with their merry restless feet centuries ago—a place.

She did not know there had ever been houses on the bridge, or so-called traitors' heads set on high there. On that landing at the Old Swan, close to where she herself stepped from the steamboat, Eleanor, Duchess of Gloucester, began one of her public penances for the sin of witchcraft. Over and over again she had stood under the shadow of St. Mary Overie and yet never entered the Lady's Chapel. There had been no one to tell her of the Tabard Inn, and show her in fancy the Canterbury Pilgrims who lodged there and will haunt the place forever, though no stone of the building remains to reward curious sight-seekers, and modern London like a mighty ocean sweeps over those ancient landmarks, the memory of which it, nevertheless, fails to obliterate. No—though the girl's

was a nature to have been fascinated by the story of olden times—all the traditions of the past were as a sealed book to her. She was too young to remember even that now comparatively old London middle-aged people love with a tender sadness to recall.

Born before any of the great works completed during the last twenty-five years were begun, she had, nevertheless, no memory of a time when Broad Street Station, the Metropolitan Railway, the Thames Embankment, Queen Victoria Street, giant hotels, board schools, civil-service stores were not—of a time, in fact, as one of the present generation might naturally suggest, when nothing was.

How did people get on a quarter of a century ago without all the modern improvements they are at present blessed with?

Well, much as they get on now. They ate, they drank, they married and were given in marriage, they struggled through life's little day more or less successfully; they suffered, they grew aged, they laughed, they wept, they cheated, they were cheated, they did brave deeds, they were guilty of villainy, they fell sick and recovered, or they fell sick and died and passed into the silent land precisely as folks do to this hour.

The centuries come and the centuries go while the main facts of existence change not at all. The fashions of this world may vary, but the human nature which sets or follows those fashions doesn't alter as many worthy individuals imagine.

Aileen was a Londoner bred and born, and not one of the things in the city she walked through looked strange to her, yet she felt lonely, because the streets she passed were not those habit had made familiar.

It was another phase of metropolitan life from any she was well acquainted with which presented itself. In Battersea, for example, she knew many persons both by sight and to speak to, and even in the thoroughfares leading to the Borough Market she often met chance acquaintances who exchanged greetings with her.

When she got into Swan Lane all this was changed, and though not shy she began to feel timid about her visit to Messrs. Desborne's office.

The day had not begun well for her. There are days in which everything seems to go wrong, and for Aileen so far that promised to be one of them.

She had risen with a headache consequent upon having been obliged to sit up late the night before. Mrs. Jeckles' illness troubled her, for the poor old lady had often proved a friend in need—the experience with Mr. Plashet's merry gentlemen could not be regarded by a quiet modest girl as exactly agreeable, and worse than all she didn't see her way about matters at home.

While it lasted the quick run down the river—the keen air—the bright sunshine—the succession of changing objects—the very landing of some passengers and taking on of others had roused and done her good, but once more on terra firma the former dejection resumed its sway.

Out of spirits herself, the “day-after-the-fair” look of those she met struck her as very depressing also. On some mornings—and for that matter on some evenings, too—only the men and women, who know nothing they are wanted to know are abroad.

On that morning no one had even so much as heard of Cloak Lane, but many were quite certain it was Cross Lane, or Finch Lane, or Petticoat Lane, or Cloth Fair Aileen was searching for.

The persons she asked belonged to that curious type who, if an inquirer wishes to be put in the right way for Pudding Lane, at once assumes Pie Corner must be meant, and it was more by accident than owing to any wit or wisdom on the part of those who vouchsafed information that she did not find herself in Houndsditch, or threading the mazes of Bartholomew Close, Little Britain, and Long Lane; but was only merrily tossed like a shuttlecock from Cannon and Thames Street, from Thames Street to Fenchurch

Street, and thence back to Cannon Street, where the scent of course lay warm. Still she was not aware of that, and for some time pursued her inquiries without getting much nearer her object.

She asked a shopboy, who did not think there was such a place. She asked a cabman, who replied he didn't know much about the city. She asked a poorly-dressed woman, who said, "I am certain I can't tell you." She asked a mechanic, and he answered, "I am a stranger myself." Then she stopped a work-girl, who made the consolatory observation, "I am sure it is not in the city. You had better try the other side of the water." She could not see a policeman, and though she ran after a letter-carrier she only reached that functionary in time to see him ascending a steep flight of stairs, up which she did not like to follow.

She was wandering in the direction of Cheapside, and would possibly have taken a turn round the Mansion House, the Royal Exchange, and the Bank of England had she not happened to espy a telegraph messenger.

"If you please," she cried, "will you tell me where to find Cloak Lane," as if Cloak Lane had been carelessly mislaid somewhere.

"Why you are coming away from it. Cross Cannon Street; first turn to the left, as you go to Southwark Bridge. You can't miss it," and the lad, who had paused in his haste to answer, ran off leaving Aileen to think what a civil, well-spoken little chap he was, to wonder how boys fell into such berths, and to wish her brother—so-called—had a chance of getting into any employment of the sort.

Following his directions in less than a minute she found the place she had been in search of, and which she must have passed close to over and over again.

Walking slowly down one side of the lane and then crossing to the other and repeating her performance she still failed to see the name she was in search

of, and had to seek information from a porter who was in charge of a truck opposite one of the houses.

For answer he pointed to a door close at hand, and said "Go in there."

Aileen did as she was directed, and when she entered was rewarded by seeing "Clerk's Office" painted so that they who run might read.

Taking her courage in her hand she knocked on the panel. There was no answer, so she knocked again louder.

"Come in," called out a sharp voice, and Aileen turning the handle, crossed the threshold.

Near the window a man sat at a high desk writing behind a short counter. Doing nothing stood a young fellow, who looked at the girl, as she walked forward with the expression of a person who felt convinced she had strayed in by mistake.

A pen was stuck jauntily behind his right ear, and he arrested attention, not merely by reason of the plainness of his face, but also because of the perfect self-satisfaction which clothed him as with a garment.

Aileen had seen that morning some hundreds of smart, good-looking, well set-up young clerks, but not one of them attracted or remained in her memory, as did this ugly piece of lively impudence, who, putting the palms of both hands flat on the counter, bent over it with a sort of "What for you, Miss" expression beaming in his face, which was eminently disconcerting.

"Is Mr. Desborne in?" asked the girl, thus settling the question as to whether she had wandered there by chance in the negative.

"I regret to say he is not," answered the clerk, who at once saw an opportunity which he did not mean to lose of having some fun.

In truth, poor Aileen looked as little like a possible client to such a firm as can well be imagined.

Her black straw bonnet, if not worn quite at the altitude affected by peripatetic green-grocers of the

better sex, was perched sufficiently high on her head to afford some protection from the sun.

"It was cocked up like a haymaker's," explained Mr. Tripsdale, subsequently, "and she had a great white linen apron over a clean print gown, and a jacket that had seen hard service on the top of that. 'Pon my honor, I made sure she had come about some Old Bailey case — assault, or passing bad coins, or burglary. You might have knocked me over with a feather when I heard her errand."

But Aileen did not tell him her errand then, or ever. Knowledge came to Mr. Tripsdale otherwise. When she found Mr. Desborne was not in, she asked, "Can I see his son, then?"

"Well, the fact is," answered Mr. Tripsdale, leaning more and more over the counter, and speaking in a private and confidential tone, "that we have no son here. Mr. Edward Desborne was once the son when he had a father, but he has no father now, and he would be the father if he had a son, which he has not. I trust I make my meaning clear?"

"You mean, I suppose, there is no one I can speak to about the matter that brought me into the city?" said Aileen.

"Unless I can be of service," suggested Mr. Tripsdale, with a smile which added quite a weird attraction to his face.

"What is the best time to see Mr. Desborne?" asked the girl, passing by this generous offer as unworthy of notice.

In answer, Mr. Tripsdale looked at the clock which ticked above the chimney-piece, then he took out a silver watch and consulted it, before he said :

"Really, as a rule, I do not think you could better this hour. Mr. Desborne generally reaches the office at an early period of the day, but these holiday times make us all a little unpunctual. If you were to tell me the nature of your business I might be able to save you a journey."

"Thank you; but I want to see Mr. Desborne."

"But I assure you Mr. Desborne is not always to be seen. He is often engaged in writing, for instance, or has clients with him, and could not perhaps make leisure to see you when you called, happy though he would be to do so, I have no doubt, if it were possible. Really, you had better indicate the matter which is engaging your attention, or at least leave your name and address."

"If Mr. Desborne was in he would see me, I think," said Aileen, not without dignity, though there were tears in her eyes and her cheeks were unusually red. "I am often near here, so I will take my chance and call some other day. Good-morning," and she was turning to go when the man who had been writing got down from his stool, caught Mr. Tripsdale by the arm, and muttering "Don't be an ass," jerked him from the counter.

"Mr. Desborne is rather uncertain," he went on, addressing the girl, "and you might call here many times and not find him unless you had an appointment. Is there nothing I can attend to for you? Perhaps I could advise you to whom to apply if you are in any difficulty."

"You are very kind—but I am not in any difficulty, thank you. It is Mr. Desborne I want to see, and I must just call till I see him. Good-day, sir," and this time she really left the office, when Mr. Tripsdale walked across the floor on tiptoe, the better to indicate unbounded astonishment, which proceeding drew from the elder clerk an expression of belief that he was a confounded fool.

"Did you ever, ever," hummed Mr. Tripsdale, "did you ever, ever, did you ever see a wha-ha-a-al, did you ever, ever——"

"Stop that row, can't you," interrupted the other. "I have seen you and that's enough," which was a singularly inappropriate retort, since Mr. Tripsdale was in every respect unlike a whale of any known species.

Meanwhile Aileen, after pausing on the step, proceeded in the direction of Ludgate Hill. At that moment a gentleman walking on the opposite side of the road, left the curb and crossed the lane, the pleasantest-looking gentleman, Aileen thought, she had ever seen; so pleasant-looking, in fact, that she turned her head and stared after him, a fault of which no Lady Clara Vere de Vere would, of course, have been guilty—a fault, indeed, into which this poor girl was not in the habit of falling; but now, when she did fall into it, she saw that on the threshold she had just left the gentleman was standing looking after her with an amused and genial sort of curiosity.

Instantly it flashed through Aileen's mind that this pleasant gentleman was the one she sought, and without stopping to think she turned back, and asked, on the spur of the moment:

"Oh, sir, are you Mr. Desborne?"

"My name is Desborne," he said. "Can I do anything for you?"

"I did want to see you, sir—about this," and she gave him the newspaper cutting, at which he glanced in evident surprise.

"And what have you to do with this?" he inquired.

"Timothy Fermoy was my father, sir."

"Was? Is he dead, then?"

"Yes, sir—he died four years ago the 10th of last March."

"You had better come in," said Mr. Desborne, and he held first the outer door, then the door of the clerks' office, and finally the door leading into his own private room open for her to pass through.

"Here's a go," remarked Mr. Tripsdale the moment principal and client had disappeared.

"I hope this will be a warning to you," said his senior, with a severity which was assumed to conceal his own astonishment.

CHAPTER IV.

IN CLOAK LANE.

Probably there was not in the city of London a pleasanter man to talk to than Mr. Edward Desborne.

He was not merely pleasant to talk to, but pleasant in every relation of life. He overflowed with kindness. He never felt so happy as when conferring a favor, or subscribing to a charity, or helping some widow in her need, or assisting a hard-worked father to keep his legs or get on them again.

Many men obtain a character for goodness on insufficient grounds, but Edward Desborne deserved every word of praise which was spoken concerning him, and many that were never uttered.

For his kindness was as warm as the sun, as gracious as summer rain, and his manners were of that delightful sort which make those who come under their influence better and more charitable.

There was in his nature no sham or pretence of any description. Where others said, "Poor fellow," or "how sad," and immediately forgot the sadness and the poor fellow, Mr. Desborne's first speech would be, "What can we do for him?" thus crediting friends and neighbors with his own generous desires, and so wrapping the whole human family in his own philanthropic mantle.

He had been popular all his life—at school, at college, in the office where he served his time, and now, when over forty, he was popular in the city, in society, and at his club.

The one place where, perhaps, he stood on a lower

platform was his own home, but the cause chanced to be that he had married a lady of higher rank than his own, who didn't love him quite so much as he loved her. In fact she didn't love him at all, for the sufficient reason that she couldn't love anyone greatly except herself.

Mr. Desborne, however, simply adored his wife. To him she seemed the truest lady, the noblest woman earth ever beheld. In his eyes she could do nothing but what was right; her wishes always appeared reasonable; the only sorrow he ever felt being that anything he could offer should prove so utterly unworthy her acceptance.

His affection would have exhausted the mines of Golconda, and lavished all the gold King Solomon gathered together. He deemed himself quite unfit to possess such a treasure. It was a delight to him even to see her cross a room, to hear her foot fall on the stairs, to listen to her voice—ay, even to imagine her shadow touched him as she passed!

Never was a woman loved with a devotion so entire, so unselfish; and the world looking kindly on, thought what a perfect creature she must be to inspire such worship.

Edward Desborne, in addition to being a model husband, was very good to look at. Though forty, his blue eyes had still a bright, boyish expression, which proved infinitely charming. Tall, fair, light-haired, clean shaven, Aileen Fermoy made no mistake when she decided he was the very pleasantest gentleman her eyes had ever beheld. He was pleasant to everyone—from a crossing sweeper to the best client his firm could boast. To all women he was chivalrous, and though, in Aileen's case, it might be supposed his politeness proceeded from interested motives, it is but fair to say he would have been equally courteous to the humblest housewife who on Saturday night spent her husband's hardly earned wages to the best advantage in High Street, Hoxton.

After they had entered his private office he placed a chair for Timothy Fermoy's daughter with as much respect as though she had been the finest lady in the land, and when, after a moment's hesitation, the girl sat down, he drew one forward for himself, saying, at the same time :

"Now, let me hear all about it."

To Aileen's comprehension it seemed that it was she who had come to hear "all about" whatever there was to tell, so she answered, in her own pretty modest way :

"Indeed, sir, I know nothing."

He smiled, and she could not help smiling in return. "Really a pretty girl," he thought ; "a nice, frank, pretty girl ! What a pity—what a thousand pities," which mental remark had no connection with her looks, bad or good.

"How did you happen to see this advertisement ?" he asked.

"A gentleman showed it to me yesterday, and said it ought to be attended to."

"Quite so," an observation which might have meant much or little. "You will not mind answering a few questions ?"

"Oh, no, sir."

Mr. Desborne stretched out his hand to touch the bell, but on second thoughts drew it back again ; and, taking a sheet of paper out of the case, lifted a pencil, looked at it, and then observed :

"And so you are the daughter of Timothy Fermoy ?"

"Yes, sir, my mother never had another child."

"Do you know where he was born ?"

"He was born and bred in Clontarf, not far out of Dublin, but his father came from King's County."

"Oh ! what was his father ?"

"Coachman, sir, to Admiral Cecil."

"Yes ; just tell me anything that occurs to you about your parents, and I can ask you such questions as occur to me afterward."

It was not difficult for Aileen to talk about herself and her belongings. In that rank of life egotism is even more natural than in a higher, and, therefore, after the first awkwardness of speaking freely to a stranger and that stranger a gentleman, she proceeded without hesitation to explain how her father when a lad went as a boy under the butler at Admiral Cecil's establishment, and how when he knew his business thoroughly General Galvaine took him for his own butler. "My mother was lady's maid to Mrs. Galvaine," the girl added, "and so they became acquainted."

"I understand."

"When they had saved enough money they made up their minds to get married, and they started a green-grocer's shop in Kensington, where they did well till my mother died."

"Yes, and then?"

"My father's health broke, and he thought he would make a shift, so he sold his business and bought another in Kennington Park Road."

"That is rather odd," said Mr. Desborne, looking thoughtfully down on the paper, which he tapped with his pencil—then as an idea struck him he asked, "Did he trade in his own name?"

"No, sir, he took the shop off a man called Fidgeley, and never changed the name above the door. It was more convenient. There were bill-heads and all."

"I see; did he die there?"

"He died in Guy's Hospital."

"Badly off?"

"Not to say badly off, sir; only the doctors thought he'd have better care there, and that he might get strong again. But his heart was broken. He never rightly held up his head after my mother's death."

"Ah! very sad; and where have you been living since?"

"With Mrs. Fermoy."

"Who is she?—what relation to you, I mean?"

"She's my father's widow, sir. Before he died he

married her, for he thought it would be hard for me to be left alone in the world if anything happened to him, and indeed she is a good-natured woman."

"You don't call her mother?"

"No, sir."

"Do you not agree?"

"We agree well enough," answered Aileen, for the first time with a certain constraint, "but I don't hold with second marriages myself."

"Clearly a young person possessed of decided opinions," thought Mr. Desborne.

"What do you do for a living? Are you tolerably comfortable?"

"We can't complain, sir. There was plenty of furniture, and Mrs. Fermoy lets off enough to pay the rent and something more. Then the gentleman that showed me your advertisement lent me as much money as bought a round."

"What is a round?" asked Mr. Desborne.

"You may have a round of anything, sir—fish, or firewood, or cat's meat—or mending kettles and such like, or vegetables—mine is vegetables—and fruit," she added as an afterthought, "when it comes in."

"But how do you manage? I don't understand," he said.

"I go round, sir. In my father's time of course we were in a better way—and he only called on his customers for orders and delivered the goods—but people like us go round to sell what we can, not to gentry, but to the workingmen's wives and that sort."

"It must be a very hard life."

"Not so hard as one might think. We have to be out in all weathers, of course, but we don't get wet through very often. The worst of it is going to market so early in the winter mornings; but, indeed, sir, I'm very thankful to be able to earn as much as I do. Besides, Jack is a good lad"—with an evident desire to do full justice to that young gentleman's abilities—"he can halloo so loud."

"But why does he halloo?" asked Mr. Desborne, mystified, though interested.

"To let people know we are in the street, sir—and what we have in the cart with us."

"Oh! I comprehend," said Mr. Desborne, to whom there recurred the memory of ear-splitting yells which he had heard when passing through a certain lane in the neighborhood of Holborn. "Is it necessary to shout so loudly?"

"Yes, sir; we should do no trade if somebody did not halloo. When I began I had to hire a lad, but he was not worth half as much as Jack. Shouting that way spoils a boy's voice, though, completely—makes it hoarse and rough."

"Spoils it for singing, I suppose you mean."

"Yes, or for talking. Perhaps, sir, you have never spoken to a coster; but if you had, you could not help noticing the sort of voice most of them have. You would think they had a bad cold. That comes from crying out what they have to sell."

"Does it, indeed? Poor fellows."

"I am often sorry for them myself," said Aileen, touched by a sympathetic tone in Mr. Desborne's voice; "many of them are such industrious, civil chaps."

"I have no doubt of it; but Jack isn't a costermon-ger, is he?"

"No, sir; he is Mrs. Fermoy's son."

"And consequently your brother."

"In a sort of a way, sir."

Mr. Desborne glanced back over the few notes he had made, which had seemed to Aileen written by magic till he came to this: "The only child my mother ever had." Then he turned to Aileen, and said:

"Your father having married a second time, your stepmother's sons must be your half-brothers."

"No, sir," very decidedly.

"Then tell me the relation in which you think they stand to you."

The girl raised a pair of honest eyes to his, and answered :

"Of course I can't tell, sir, exactly, but I think they are none of them any relation at all. Mrs. Calloran was a widow woman when my father married her, and her four sons are all Callorans, not Fermoy's."

"Then in fact there is no Fermoy but yourself?"

"And Mrs. Fermoy, sir, as I told you."

"Is she an Irishwoman?"

"No, sir—English—but her first husband was London Irish, like myself."

"What is a London Irish person?"

"A boy or girl born in London of Irish parents."

"A very clear definition," said Mr. Desborne with his pleasant smile, and then he glanced over his notes once again.

"It is a long way from Dublin to Kensington," he said. "How did it happen that your parents took such a leap?"

"General Galvaine came to London, and they came with him. They were married at St. Mary Abbot's, Kensington."

"You have not told me your Christian name, I think."

"Aileen, sir—Aileen Anisia. I was called after Mrs. Galvaine—she stood godmother to me."

"When your father left Ireland had he any relatives living there?"

"No, sir, not that I ever heard of. He had nobody belonging to him, so far as I know, any place, except an uncle that went out to America."

"Was he a Fermoy also?"

"Yes, sir, Shawn Fermoy; if he is living, he must be an old man now."

There ensued a pause, during which Mr. Desborne once again looked at his notes.

"Thank you," he said at last. "I do not think I need trouble you further at present, but I should like you to give me your address in case I want to write to you."

"I live at 7 Field Prospect Road, Battersea," answered the girl; "but please don't write to me there."

"No?"

"They would all at home want to know who the letter was from—and I'd rather not, sir. If you would have the kindness to send a line for me—an envelope directed to Mr. Vernham, care of Messrs. Brice & Co., Minories, I'd get it quite safe."

"Is Mr. Vernham a relative of yours?"

"Of mine! Oh, no, sir—he's a gentleman."

The statement seemed to Mr. Desborne odd, but he asked no question and made no comment, only took down the address, and said:

"Very well," in a tone Aileen concluded meant that she might go.

She rose to depart, but stood irresolute, evidently having something on her mind of which she wished to disburden it.

"I hope, sir," she began, "you won't think I am taking too much of a liberty—but why did you want to see my father?"

Mr. Desborne looked at her as she spoke as if he too had forgotten something he ought to have remembered.

"When you read our advertisement what did you think it meant?" he asked, answering her question with another.

"I could not think, sir. Mr. Philip—Mr. Vernham I should say—asked me if there was anybody who would be likely to leave my father money, and I could not call to mind anyone unless General Galvaine. Then Mr. Philip told me the general was alive, and that perhaps father was wanted as a witness or something of that sort, and I thought if you didn't mind I should like to know. You'll excuse me, sir?"

"There is nothing to excuse. It is most natural you should wish to know, but at present I am not able to tell you very much. The matter is more in my uncle's hands than mine. I may say, however, that it relates to money."

"To money, sir?"

"Yes, you must not go home fancying yourself an heiress."

"I am not likely to do that, sir," said Aileen, in the tone of a person who felt there was something sadly grotesque in the suggestion.

"Still it seems to me probable something will be coming to you, and, therefore, if a small sum would be of any use at present we should be happy to advance it."

"Thank you, sir, but I am not in need."

"I think you had better have a few pounds. You may wish to buy something; all young girls"—he had been about to say ladies, but had substituted the better word—"love to buy a new dress, do they not?"

"Many of them do, very likely," she answered, flushing to her temples; "but I have had other things to consider."

"Well, consider a new dress now. Suppose I write a check for twenty pounds?"

"Indeed, sir, I am obliged, but I have enough gowns—and I would have come in a better"—here the flush grew deeper—"only I had to go to market, and——"

"I hope," interrupted Mr. Desborne, "you do not imagine I think the dress you wear other than most proper and suitable. Why I mentioned such a thing was because I often hear fashions in dresses talked about. Is not there any purchase you would care to make?"

"You are too kind, sir—but I do not want to buy anything unless——"

"You need not tell me if you feel I am unworthy of confidence," he rejoined, lightly.

"It is not that, sir—and I would be quite wrong to take what you offer—because, sir, if there should be no money coming to me how would I ever pay you back?"

"I would take my chance of that."

"But I couldn't, sir. If not asking too much, though,

£5 would be a great help to me. I had saved up against the preserving time, for we get some good orders then from richer people than we serve in our regular round—but the money was taken.”

“How do you mean taken—stolen?”

“It was not thought stealing exactly, but I’ll never get it back again all the same.”

“And are you sure £5 will be sufficient?”

“Yes, sir, it will do; I’ll take that if you are so good as to trust me, but no more.”

Mr. Desborne laid down five sovereigns and watched the girl with a curious interest as she took out her handkerchief, knotted the money into one corner, laid the corner in her palm, drew a fold of the handkerchief between her first and second fingers, and wrapped the other portion round and round her hand.

As she finished this performance she chanced to look up, and seeing Mr. Desborne’s amused expression a smile leaped into her eyes, and spread over her face like a sudden burst of sunshine.

He laughed and said, “I never saw that done before. Will it be safe?”

“Quite, sir—it’s the safest way of carrying money, unless in your mouth—and I never like to put it there, because I don’t know who may have been handling it.”

“Do people ever keep money in their mouths?”

“Oh! yes, sir, lots of the poorer sort who have holes in their pockets and no purses—and often no handkerchief either.”

Mr. Desborne did not answer, for the excellent reason that he was unable to think of anything to say.

The incongruity between this girl’s present associates and her future prospects; between this struggling to-day and possibly brilliant to-morrow; between that bandaged hand and the fortune its fellow hand might hold, struck him all at once as something so pathetic and so out of all proportion, he could only open a door leading into the hall and walk with her in silence to the

step outside, standing on which he had first noticed her.

The poor as the rich know them, and the poor as the poor know them, are so very different that when the curtain is lifted sufficiently even to afford a peep at the reality of their existence, it gives a greater shock to well-to-do folks than they care to experience.

Mr. Desborne's kindly face wore a much graver expression than usual when he re-entered his office, where he at once proceeded to write a note which he directed to Philip Vernham, Esq., asking that gentleman to favor him with a few minutes' conversation at his early convenience.

CHAPTER V.

THE JUNIOR PARTNER.

If Mr. Desborne ever wondered, as indeed he did more than once after their interview, whether Timothy Fermoy's daughter were quite straightforward ; if it had occurred to him—still in a speculative sort of way it was probably quite as well she declined, for reasons best known to herself, that twenty pounds offered in the pure kindness of his heart—the moment he saw Aileen's friend, Mr. Philip, all doubts vanished as completely as mists melt away before the sun.

There could be no conspiracy between them—he was evidently as straightforward as she—and all the sure faith Aileen had inspired, but which eight-and-forty hours managed to put a little to the rout, returned with conviction.

“Yes,” Mr. Vernham explained, “he had known Aileen Fermoy since she was quite a child. His father baptized her, Mrs. Galvaine stood godmother. These facts were writ plainly in the parish register of St. Mary Abbot's twenty-two years previously. He remembered Fermoy's shop in Kensington. Been in it often when a small lad, and also in later life. His parents dealt there. Fermoy was a pleasant, well-mannered, industrious, ready fellow, who had received some education. Mrs. Fermoy was—but I cannot speak about her, Mr. Desborne, as I ought,” the young man broke off to say. “She was an unselfish, devoted, unworldly creature, who tended my mother for six years with a love and a kindness simply unimaginable. She was to her nurse, friend, servant, sister, daughter

all in one—I could never tell you the extent of her affection, generosity, and delicate consideration. If we had been rich as we were poor, great as we were of small account, we could never have been treated by her as we were. It is no marvel I should do such little as lies in my power for Aileen Fermoy. If I were able to give her thousands, no money could repay the debt of gratitude I owe to her parents.”

“Really, now, this is very novel,” commented Mr. Desborne, turning his chair a little so as more directly to face his visitor, who spoke with an enthusiasm all the more convincing because it was absolutely destitute of excitement.

His voice held a tone as though tears drawn from some deep fount of early sorrow were not very far distant, but his manner was quiet and full of the goodly habit of self-restraint.

Certainly, thought the lawyer, they are a curious pair, a very curious pair, that interested him mightily, but also were a puzzle. He could not grasp the situation, and he scarcely saw his way to ask any questions to render such an extraordinary alliance intelligible.

Mr. Vernham saw something of this embarrassment in Mr. Desborne’s face and hastened to relieve it.

“I suppose there is a legacy behind your advertisement,” he went on, “and that you have sent for me to tell you all I know about Timothy Fermoy and his daughter. I may say in a word then—I know nothing but what is good of the Fermoyes.”

“I am convinced of that—but you see—well to be plain, if everything comes out right there will be money—for this girl—and from the terms in which she referred to you I thought I might obtain some further information without raising undue hopes in the mind of the person most interested.”

“Aileen is very practical,” commented Mr. Vernham.

“No doubt ; but still she is young, and it would be cruel to excite her expectations only to disappoint them. It was for this reason I took the liberty of asking you

to call, which I trust has not been an inconvenience. I had no idea you were so near Miss Aileen's own age. I imagined you might take a fatherly interest in her welfare."

The young man looked at Mr. Desborne for a second with an expression in his eyes as though he were not quite pleased, but there was no cause for offence in the lawyer's face, and Aileen's singular friend answered frankly :

"I take as keen an interest in her welfare as if she were my sister ; keener, I think, because in that case the ties of blood would modify much that I feel toward this girl. I am aware it is nothing concerning me you want to hear, but yet I can scarcely make you comprehend the position in which I stand to Aileen Fermoy unless I speak of myself."

"Indeed, Mr. Vernham, I should be delighted to hear anything you may have to tell, always supposing the past is not unpleasant to recall."

"You mean if there be no painful story in my life," said the young man, with a smile. "I am happy to assure you my past has not a skeleton hidden anywhere—our record is clean enough, I think. There has been no worse stain than poverty—caused by others—no more bitter grief than death."

"What can be more bitter?"

"Disgrace," was the reply. "I hear of troubles every day which I wonder men can bear and live."

"Many men do not seem to have much difficulty in bearing troubles which leave health and pocket untouched," said Mr. Desborne, dryly.

"That is precisely what amazes me."

"I gather that your father is or was a clergyman, Mr. Vernham?"

"Was—he died nearly fifteen years ago."

"Then surely he must have known himself and informed you that the heart of man is deceitful above all things."

"And desperately wicked," finished Mr. Philip.

"Yes, I suppose he did know the fact in the same abstract way that we all do. Probably he thought there were wicked people at Mile End, or in the New Cut, or even a few streets distant from his own house, but I greatly doubt if he ever realized his next door neighbor could be deceitful till he learned the fact from experience."

"Ay, how was that?"

"Of course I do not mean exactly his next door neighbor—but a great house, the principal in which he and his family had known and trusted for years—all his money, and he was fairly rich, was in the custody of that house which people considered as safe as the Bank of England till it collapsed."

"And he lost——"

"Everything. I ought to tell you that after he had been at St. Mary Abbot's for five or six years he was appointed to a very good living in Bedfordshire, which he had held only for about twenty months before Valleroy's crash."

"Only fancy his being beggared through Valleroy's," commented Mr. Desborne. "But I beg your pardon—you were saying——"

"That even after they suspended payment the public supposed a good deal would be saved out of the wreck. I need not tell you how affairs turned out. To end the story, so far as our part in it is concerned, at length my father, worn out with anxiety, died, leaving us utterly destitute, save for a modest annuity secured to my mother by an insurance he had fortunately effected in the Scottish Widows' Fund."

"Ah!" exclaimed Mr. Desborne.

"It was necessary to return to London, and as her income would only afford the most modest apartments, my mother wrote to Mrs. Fermoy, for whom she had always entertained a great respect and liking, asking if she knew anyone who had rooms to let at the required price. A reply came at once saying that the Fermoy's would be pleased to let their first floor, and

hoping she would not be offended. I do not think I need weary you further, Mr. Desborne. I am sure you understand now how it happens that I know so much of the Fermoy's, and think so highly of them."

"Thank you ; I believe I understand perfectly. The only thing I am not quite clear about is how Timothy Fermoy's daughter happens to be in—in such an humble position, since, as I comprehend, her father sold one business and bought another, and was at no time in indigent circumstances."

"That is quite true. He was always, for his station, well to do. After my mother's death I still continued to lodge in their house until Mrs. Fermoy was attacked with an illness which ended fatally, and, of course, I never lost sight of them. When Fermoy was in Guy's I used to go and see him there as often as possible. Poor fellow, I am afraid he realized long before he went there that his second marriage was an utter mistake. He thought to secure a home and a friend for Aileen, but——"

"Is Mrs. Fermoy No. 2 so very objectionable?" asked Mr. Desborne.

"There is nothing against her character, if that is what you mean," answered the man. "She means to be kind ; she is good-natured, and honest, and sober, and all that ; but it is a miserable home for the girl to be in, and the chief burden of supporting it lies on her. Mrs. Fermoy No. 2 had a right royal time after Fermoy's death ; she sold the good-will, and the carts, and the horses, and the stock all well, for she is a pushing, rather clever woman—clever, I mean, over a bargain—and while the money lasted she never asked herself where more was to come from."

"It did not last long, I suppose?"

"It did not. Then Mrs. Fermoy, who boasts she is 'not one to sit with her hands in her lap when there is any work to do,' found the house where they reside at present with the little business attached, which her stepdaughter manages. There is no absolute want,

I hope, but Mrs. Fermoy's sons, the Callorans, are a sadly rough lot, and I have often wished Aileen could separate herself from them and take a situation as lady's maid or something of that sort. She is not badly educated, and would make a useful companion—I mean in an humble sort of way, of course."

"Of course," echoed Mr. Desborne, in an enigmatical tone.

"But the poor girl has an idea the household could not be maintained if she left it, and I do not like pressing her to take a course she feels wrong."

"Quite impossible."

"Should she be entitled to any legacy, however, her stepmother had better know nothing concerning it."

"Miss Fermoy seems to entertain a precisely similar opinion."

"I am glad to hear that, because whether the amount proves small or large—five pounds or five hundred—it would melt like summer snow in Mrs. Fermoy's hands."

"Yes," said Mr. Desborne, thoughtfully—"yes."

"Is there any further information I can give you?" asked the young man, breaking the silence which ensued.

"I think not, thank you. If there should be I may take the liberty of writing to you again. You are in Brice's house?"

"Yes—clerk."

"And a letter will always find you if addressed there?"

"Or to my lodgings in Colebrook Row."

"Who lives in Colebrook Row, if I may inquire?" asked a cheery incisive voice at this juncture, and Mr. Vernham, turning quickly round at the question, saw a small man with gray hair and dark eyes, who, having entered by the door leading from the hall and come quietly across the room, had heard the words which dictated his question.

"I do," answered the young man, with a grave and distant inclination of his head.

"And, may I ask, if you ever see Hope sitting there speculating on traditionary gudgeons?"

"I have not been so fortunate," replied Mr. Vernham, in the tone of a person humoring some crazy fancy. As a matter of fact, he concluded his questioner was deficient, not to use a stronger word.

"Ah, you don't read Lamb, I see; perhaps, like many young fellows, you think him out of date."

"I beg your pardon. I had forgotten. Hope, so far as I know, does not reside in Colebrook now, but if Elia were to return there I could take her to several places not a stone's throw from Cloak Lane where she not only speculates upon gudgeons, but catches them too."

"Ay, indeed, and where are her fisheries, if I may ask?"

"In every city, town, and village of Great Britain. There never were such fisheries before—not even in the time of the South Sea bubble."

"And Hope is represented by——"

"The modern promoter—who sits at ease in his office and angles through the post."

"Humph! Have you fallen a victim to the modern promoter?"

"I have nothing to lose," was the reply.

"Mr. Vernham's father was a sufferer through Valleroy's failure," explained Mr. Desborne.

"I felt sure you were Mr. Vernham," said the elder man. "I am very glad to make your acquaintance. Many and many a pleasant hour have I spent in the company of a gentleman of your name."

"Did you know my father?" questioned the young fellow, eagerly.

"I think not. To the best of my belief the gentleman I refer to died before your father could have been born. My friend, my cherished companion, is Abner Vernham."

"My great grandfather was Abner Vernham, but he has been dead nearly a hundred years."

"Yes, but his books are not dead. They are upon my shelves, perfect mines of information. And so you are his descendant? How oddly things come round. And you have kindly called to tell us about the fair itinerant, or, more correctly, fair peripatetic?"

"Mr. Vernham does not understand your flowers of language, uncle," said Mr. Desborne, noticing the sudden cloud which swept over their visitor's face.

"I do not quite understand," said the young man, with a cold constraint. "Though Aileen Fermoy's shop is but a small one, the girl is in no sense an itinerant."

"He does not know," thought Mr. Desborne; "he has never seen her 'dressed in character.'"

"I expressed myself foolishly," said the other Mr. Desborne, who, though older than his nephew, was junior in the firm. "Fact is, I have never seen the young lady."

"Aileen does not pretend to be a young lady; she has too much sense," interrupted Aileen's friend.

"The young woman then," substituted Mr. Thomas Desborne. "My nephew has had that privilege, however, and I may venture to say he was greatly struck not merely with her good looks, but with her good sense."

"Is she good-looking?" marvelled Mr. Vernham, as if propounding the question to himself.

"In my opinion—not that that is worth much, of course—decidedly good-looking," interrupted the head of the firm.

"Well, perhaps so—possibly she is—but the idea never occurred to me that she had any pretensions to beauty."

"You mistake; I did not say she was beautiful. I said she is good-looking, and I may add I consider she is better than good-looking. I cannot recall ever before seeing a face so honest, kind, and frank."

"There I am quite with you," said the young man.

"What further charm could be added to a woman's

face than those my nephew has mentioned?" asked Mr. Thomas Desborne.

"I do not profess to be an expert," was the reply, "but I imagine a woman might be frank, kind, and honest and yet seem very plain indeed."

"You regard expression as nothing, then?"

"I regard expression as a great deal. It is entirely her expression which makes Aileen Fermoy pleasant to look upon as her mother was before her."

"You knew her mother?"

"Mr. Vernham has been explaining to me how he came to know the Fermoy's so intimately. I am greatly indebted to him," put in Mr. Edward Desborne, not sorry to give the conversation this turn.

"As I have mentioned, I am only too glad to be of the slightest service to Aileen Fermoy."

"I feel so sure of that I do not apologize for having given you a vast amount of trouble," answered Mr. Desborne, warmly.

"Indeed you need not."

"Putting Miss Fermoy aside for a moment, will you allow me to say how pleased I am to make the acquaintance of Mr. Abner Vernham's great-grandson. What an antiquarian, to be sure. By the bye, he was at one time curate of St. Christopher's, close at hand."

"Well, hardly close at hand now," corrected the younger man.

"Its site, its site. I have an old engraving of the church upstairs. Dear me, only to think that we should meet over this business of Timothy Fermoy's daughter."

"There are Vernhams in Sussex—relations of yours, I suppose," observed Mr. Edward Desborne, amicably, anxious to give his visitor "a leg up."

"Of Vernham Castle? No; they are not related to me. Or, to put it better, I am not related to them. They are of French extraction, I believe."

"Came over with the Conqueror, of course," said Mr. Abner Vernham's admirer, "as, I suppose, your people did too?"

"No, according to my great-grandfather, we are Saxons. I believe our name to have been originally Wirem or Wirenam. Indeed, in some old deeds it is spelt indifferently Virenham and Verenham. I have a curious paper written by my ancestor which proves that he at least had some reason for supposing we were here long before the Conqueror landed."

"Ah! you beat us hollow there—we cannot trace a step further back than 1311," said Mr. Thomas Desborne.

"But surely that is a very respectable pedigree," said the antiquarian's great-grandson, with a polite smile, "and one which is probably a vast deal clearer than ours," he added, in a spirit of proud humility.

"I cannot say much about the clearness," confessed the other. "There is a Desborne mentioned at the time Edward the Second assigned the 'favor of the city' to the Mayor and Aldermen—and then we hear little of the family till Ralph Desborne died of the plague in 1543, leaving large benefactions to the poor. Whether he was the direct ancestor of Fulbrick Desborne, beheaded on Tower Hill, from whom we can claim a direct descent, is somewhat doubtful. But I weary you, Mr. Vernham. I forgot the present generation lives too fast to take any interest in such old-world questions."

"There is no question in which I take so much interest as that of genealogy," answered the young man.

"Your own," thought Mr. Edward Desborne, but he kept silence, while his uncle said, archly :

"I foresee, Mr. Vernham, that I shall very often have to ask you to spare me a few minutes' chat about Miss Fermoy's affairs."

"As often as you please," was the reply. "I pass close by here frequently, and, even if I did not, I should only have to ask for leave to absent myself, and, as a rule, it would be granted."

"You like Messrs. Brice ; you find them pleasant?" asked Mr. Edward Desborne.

"They are very considerate," after which prudent acquiescence Messrs. Brice's clerk took his leave of uncle and nephew and passed out into Cloak Lane, as Aileen had done before him.

"Nice young fellow that," remarked Mr. Thomas Desborne when the office door closed behind Aileen's Mr. Philip.

Mr. Edward Desborne did not answer. He was leaning back in his chair and tapping a gold pencil-case on the blotting-pad.

His uncle looked at him curiously.

"I said young Vernham seemed a nice young fellow, Ned."

"I heard you," replied his nephew.

"What do you say?"

"That I think he is a bit of a prig."

"Prig—how—why?"

"Well, for one reason, because of the way in which he referred to our client."

"In what way would you have him refer to her? It appeared to me he spoke very nicely about the girl."

"He spoke as if she were infinitely beneath him in rank."

"So she is."

"As if she were some lower order of creation."

"Do be reasonable, Ned. It isn't like you to take unjust views. The young man talked about this girl Fermoy just as a young man ought to talk about a girl in her station. His tone was respectful—appreciative, friendly, but not familiar. I must say I was very much pleased both with his words and manner."

"Oh!"

The elder Desborne burst out laughing. "I knew it," he exclaimed; "I felt sure of it."

"Sure of what?"

"That at the precise moment I appeared on the scene you had evolved a very pretty little plot with Messrs. Brice's clerk for hero, and Timothy Fermoy's daughter for heroine. Here is a steady young gentle-

man, you thought, with no money—and there is a good young woman with too much—and then you were vexed to find he looked on the young woman with the eye of cool common-sense, that he was honestly her friend and not wrongly or foolishly her lover. I like very much to see you take off your hat to an old apple woman, as if she were a duchess ; there is a former-day chivalry and gallantry about your manner to the sex which has its charm, but in cool blood I suspect even you would not consider an alliance between a female costermonger and a clergyman's son a precisely desirable match."

"She is not a female costermonger, and she will be an heiress rich enough to be run after by men of far higher rank than your friend Abner Vernham's great-grandson."

"Yes ; but he does not know that, and if he did I suspect it would not make much difference."

"No ; because, as I said before, he is a bit of a prig. From the moment he began talking about his family I gave him up."

"He did not say a word about his family till you asked him if he were connected with the Sussex Vernhams."

"Who can only trace back to the Conquest," added Mr. Edward Desborne, with a satire foreign to his nature. "I do think a gentleman ought to wear his family as he does his clothes without drawing public attention to either."

"And I think it the most proper and natural thing in the world that a man should feel proud of having come of an old stock."

"I do not see that we, at any rate, have much to boast of, even though our stock be old. Go back as far as we will, we cannot claim kindred with anyone more exalted than a London merchant."

"Many an English nobleman can trace no higher origin," retorted Mr. Thomas Desborne, with a flush on his cheek ; "and better far to be descended from an honest merchant than from a profligate king and his

light o' love. Forgive me, Ned; I ought not to have said that. I am very sorry," added the speaker, with a quick tinge of compunction.

"And I ought not to have said what I did," returned his nephew, impetuously. "How foolish, wicked, I am. What is this girl, what is this young man, that they should cause me to vex you? You are sure I did not mean it. You know how much dearer you are to me than anyone except my wife," and Edward Desborne took his uncle's hand in both of his and then stroked his sleeve with a tender, caressing affection unspeakably touching.

"I do know, Ned," replied the other; "but there is something you will never know, and that is how dear you are to me."

After which remark there ensued a pause, during the continuance of which neither spoke. Then the elder man disengaged his hand, and, taking up some papers he had brought with him into the office, he went upstairs, while his nephew looked straight out of the window at the backs of the houses in Queen Street, thinking, perhaps, of the disappointment he had been to the kindest uncle that ever lived.

CHAPTER VI.

MR. TRIPSDALE.

After leaving Messrs. Desborne's offices, Mr. Vernham turned his steps, as Aileen had previously bent hers, toward Dowgate Hill.

Before he could reach that thoroughfare, however, he heard a sound as of some one hurrying behind him so fast, that even while he moved aside to give the individual space to pass, he was surprised to hear the words, "I beg your pardon, sir," uttered quite close to his ear.

Turning, he beheld a sight which surprised him—a youth wearing a gray felt top hat lower in the crown and broader in the brim than fashion usually affects, a light tweed suit, a white waistcoat, a washing tie of a pale salmon color, in which was jauntily stuck a very sporting gold pin in the shape of a horseshoe, ornamented with a pair of hunting crops artistically crossed; not that Mr. Tripsdale, for indeed it was he and none other, patronized the turf, but the accessories appealed to his sense of beauty, and as he tersely put matters—"If you do a thing at all, you ought to do the whole thing."

He had done the whole thing that day, and this marvellous get up was the consequence.

"Mr. Vernham?" he said, interrogatively, raising his hat as he spoke.

Mr. Vernham acknowledged the soft impeachment and waited for further information.

"In Messrs. Brice & Co.'s house?" gently insinuated Mr. Tripsdale.

"You are quite right. May I inquire why you ask the question?"

"Merely for the purpose of identification," was the reply. "It is somewhat awkward to thank the wrong person."

"You are right, and it is quite certain I have done nothing to merit your thanks."

"On the contrary you conferred a great favor on me last winter."

"I!" exclaimed Mr. Vernham, amazed. "To the best of my belief, I never saw you before in my life."

"And your belief is correct. Nevertheless, the fact remains that you did me a kindness for which I feel extremely grateful; I accidentally heard a Mr. Vernham was with our Mr. Desborne, and thought I would wait outside on the chance of speaking to you."

"But really I have no recollection of ever having served you in any way," persisted the young man.

"That may well be; but I am detaining you, sir. If you will allow me to walk with you—pray excuse my freedom—I mean no offence—I can explain. You trace no likeness, I suppose?" and Mr. Tripsdale presented a full front view of his face for inspection.

"Nature must have broken the mould," thought Philip Vernham. "She never surely would attempt to cast such another set of features. But," he answered, "I cannot at the moment recall anyone you resemble."

"Ah!" exclaimed the other, evidently disappointed. "Suppose we go down here."

"It doesn't matter which way I walk so long as I get to the Minories eventually," agreed Mr. Vernham, who perhaps felt as well pleased not to have to pace Cannon Street in company with that cane, that pin, and that hat.

"Thank you. May I ask you to cast your memory back to the last 27th of December?"

"I have done so, and what then?"

"On the morning of that day you travelled from Godalming in a train which stopped at Weybridge,

where a little fellow—little, though older than myself—got into the same compartment.”

“I remember him, a delicate-looking lad.”

“He is my brother.” The nods with which Mr. Tripsdale signed, sealed, and delivered, so to speak, this statement would be as impossible to describe as for any words to tell the pride, affection, and pleasure which pervaded voice and manner as he announced the relationship.

“Is he, indeed! He interested me very much. I have often thought of him since then.”

“And he has often and often and often talked about you. Poor little chap, I don’t know what he would have done if you had not paid his fare for him. He is such a sensitive fellow; his misfortune makes him, you know.”

“I noticed he was not quite straight.”

“No one could help noticing it, and that painful limp. It was a fall out of his nurse’s arms injured him. But for that he would have been a fine tall man, taller than I am.”

He might easily have topped his brother and not been a giant after all. But there was something so beautiful, so pathetic, in that brother’s love for the young life shadowed—for the stalwart frame dwarfed—that only a cynic could have smiled at the contrast between the proportions suggested and the actual individual who instituted the comparison.

“I am so sorry,” said Mr. Vernham.

“You would be if you knew him well. He is such a dear fellow, but, as a rule, shy with strangers. He says he can’t tell how it was he took so to you from the first. I wanted to call and pay you the money for him; but no, nothing would do but he must go to Brice’s himself, and that was all because he hoped he might see you. He didn’t, though.”

“No, I was out.”

“He found the ticket after all, and they returned the money at Waterloo.”

"He mentioned the fact in his letter."

They were past Calvert's Brewery and All Hallow's Church by this time. Mr. Tripsdale was so careful to give his companion the curb and to prevent his being jostled that he walked in the roadway himself, at the peril of his life and to the danger of that tweed suit, which was never built to rub shoulders with the wheels of cabs, drays, and railway vans.

It was in vain Mr. Vernham entreated him to walk on the side-path.

"I am doing very well, sir — very well indeed," was the only answer he could elicit, and he felt quite a sense of relief when Messrs. Desborne's clerk elected to leave Lower Thames Street, and turn up that vile-smelling covered passage which conducts to St. Mary-at-Hill.

"There are only the two of us," said Mr. Tripsdale, pacing jauntily along, and keeping a distant eye on various quiet, short cuts he meant presently to utilize.

"Yes, I gathered as much. I hope your brother is getting on well with the wood-engraving he spoke of."

"He is doing very well, indeed, though that sort of work has gone somewhat out of fashion. He earns more than I do," finished Mr. Tripsdale, with the air of a person stating a fact he expected might be found hard of belief.

"Does he, really?" said Mr. Vernham, surprised, not because he supposed the honorarium paid by Messrs. Desborne for his companion's services was large, but because he had somehow mistakenly jumped to the conclusion that a wood-engraver's wage must be small.

Perhaps Mr. Edward Desborne had some reason for his remark about Aileen's friend, who was inconceivably ignorant concerning many matters of which people who have knocked about the world know, at least, something. When poverty enters the world's lists clad in a complete suit of pride, the chances are against its making many friends, or of its learning to take a vast interest in the every-day, common, but often pathetically touching affairs of its neighbors.

It was partly for this reason, and partly because he had for years lived a self-contained, self-centred, and unnatural existence that Mr. Vernham knew as little about the concerns of his fellows as any gentleman well could. While Mr. Edward Desborne was a sympathetic listener to the story of everyone's pains and pleasures, Mr. Vernham preferred, as a rule, not to hear anything concerning pains he was unable to relieve—pleasures in which he felt inclined to take no share.

"He does, indeed," said Mr. Tripsdale, gratified by his companion's evident astonishment, while happily unaware of its source. "Though he is such a little fellow to look at, he can turn out splendid work. Have you happened to see 'The Dragon and Grasshopper' wrapper?"

Mr. Vernham was obliged to confess he had not seen the wrapper in question.

"Well, then, you just should. It is on all the stalls. Do take a look the first time you have a chance. No need to buy, you know. Gus cut the whole thing. Wonderful for such a young chap; but that, after all, is not what his heart is set on. He wants to be a regular artist."

It would be utterly impossible to tell the triumph with which Mr. Tripsdale made this avowal. It was as though he had said his brother desired to be Prime Minister or Commander-in-Chief, and meant to compass his ambitions.

The whole thing seemed to Mr. Vernham infinitely touching; all the more so because he did not believe the quiet, pale-faced lad who had been so distressed for the want of a few shillings was possessed of any talent beyond that of mere manual dexterity.

Delicacy of touch, quickness of perception were qualities in which by reason of his very infirmity no doubt he excelled; but the ability to engrave the work of others was one matter, while to conceive and execute work of his own was quite another.

"Has your brother talent, genius, then?" he asked, merely because he felt constrained to say something.

"Bless your heart, yes," returned Mr. Tripsdale, falling into the familiarly-colloquial style, of which he had hitherto managed to steer clear. "Excuse my rough speech, but I really could not help breaking out," he went on; "if you only saw the fancies Gus puts on paper. All out of his own head he makes the loveliest drawings. Often when I am in our office or running about the city I think to myself how the deuce does he do it? Where does he get his notions? Poor little chap, and he is so contented and happy with it all."

To the outward ear there was a want of relevance about this latter remark, but to Mr. Vernham's inner sense the connection of ideas was clear enough.

"I should like to see his drawings," he said, moved by some influence, strange even to his own mind.

"If you knew how proud it would make him!" exclaimed Mr. Tripsdale. "If you only heard what he has said about you over and over again! Of course we are only two lads in a poor way of life, and we never, except in the course of business, have the chance of speaking to a gentleman like you. But that is the reason why Gus dwelt so much upon the notice you took of him and the nice way you talked. Whenever your name comes up his face lights up all over. I can just picture him when I get home this evening."

There is no wind of flattery so sweet as that which blows soft and warm round some unexpected corner; and Mr. Vernham, being very human, succumbed to the influence of his companion's implied compliment.

We know how much more blessed it is to patronize than be patronized. To defend himself against the latter danger Philip Vernham had for years been going through the world clad in a complete suit of pride which guarded him effectually from all social assaults, but when those he considered inferiors approached him properly, he covered his chain armor with the

manner of an ordinary mortal and spoke graciously to men and women who knew "their places" and refrained from familiarity.

For this reason he was liked much better by the porters in Messrs. Brice's establishment than by his fellow clerks who thought him a "stand-off" and "stuck-up" chap with nothing to support his pretensions.

This, indeed, chanced to be the trouble. There was nothing much in the young man of a salable and serviceable kind. He had no marketable talent whatever. He was one of the honest, plodding, useful men, born by millions at a time, who are never likely to make a fortune, and who can only humbly assist others to make their fortunes. When his father lost his money and died, the young fellow's life was thrown utterly out of gear. Business was detestable to him; the mad hurry, the keen competition, the unscrupulous advantage too often taken, the constant watchfulness necessary, the continual precaution needful—all were hateful in the eyes of one whose choice would have led him to be a country clergyman and a modest scholar.

He had no gift whatever as the world accounts gifts—ordinary abilities, a high sense of honor, a desire to do his duty both to God and man; of what use were these things to a clerk in Brice's house? They did not give him five pounds yearly advance of salary. If he stayed with the firm till his hair grew gray he would never get a couple of hundred per annum from his exceedingly wise employers. He was worth no more than just what they paid.

A man under such circumstances must turn to some course of consolation.

Pride was the form Mr. Vernham's comforter assumed. With many men it takes the shape of drink; after all an irrational pride is a safer demon to welcome into one's soul.

The demon was, however, leading Philip Vernham very safely as he listened to Mr. Tripsdale's words.

"Do you really think your brother would allow me to see some of his work?" he asked.

"Do I really think?" repeated Mr. Desborne's clerk coming to a halt exactly opposite the church of St. Mary-at-Hill; "don't I really know it would be the happiest minute in his life? Because, mind you, he has nothing to be ashamed of in his work. I can't draw a line, but when I look at a painting or an illustration I know whether it is good or bad—though I could not tell you why—and Gus's work is good—it is better than good—and if the world ever gets a chance of seeing it the world will say the same. Meanwhile he can wait. If we were making hundreds a year between us I don't think we could be happier than we are, though we live on a third floor in Bartholomew Square."

"Little Britain?" suggested Mr. Vernham.

"Bless you, no; that's Bartholomew Close. We live in Bartholomew Square, Old Street, near St. Luke's Church."

"Why, I pass close by there twice a day."

"Do you, now? That's strange, too, ain't it? Well, sir, excuse the liberty I'm taking, if some day you happen to have five minutes to spare you would call. I know you'd make poor Gus laugh for joy."

"But I am never near Old Street, except in the morning or evening."

"Morning or evening, mid-day or at dead of night, we'd be proud and happy to see you in our humble home. It is humble, Mr. Vernham, I don't deny; but then, Lor', we couldn't be snugger or happier if we'd a mansion in Carlton Gardens."

"Possibly you might be less so," answered Aileen's friend.

"I'm sure we would. You'd never believe how quiet that square is in the summer evenings when the children are gone to bed. We sit by the open window in the dusk, and fancy we're miles in the country. And it is better than any country to hear Gus talk about woods and meadows and rivers, water-lilies, and such

like. I am not a great admirer of those out of London things myself, but I like to listen to Gus for all that."

"Are you not fond of the country, then?"

"No, sir, I am not; and it puzzles me how anybody else can be fond of such a place. Still, it is beautiful the way Gus tells how he was awoken by the birds each morning giving a finer concert than he ever paid a shilling to hear at St. James's Hall. But I'm detaining you, Mr. Vernham, and I ought to be getting back myself. May I say to my brother that you will come and see him?"

"Yes," answered the young man, with a little hesitation.

"Don't be afraid that we shall intrude on your kindness," went on Mr. Tripsdale, noticing the hesitation and understanding its cause. "We know our place I hope, and how to keep it. Only Gus would take a visit as much as favor."

"If so small a thing can please him, he shall certainly be gratified."

"Thank you with all my heart and soul. And when, Mr. Vernham? Don't put it off too long. Hope deferred—you remember."

"I will try to look in to-morrow evening. Will that be convenient to you?"

"As I said before, any day, any hour, you do us such an honor will be convenient."

"Good-morning, then."

"Good-morning, sir," and Mr. Tripsdale raised his hat straight in the air about six inches, put it on his head again, and without another word or look departed.

CHAPTER VII.

CHECKMATE.

Mr. Tripsdale went back to Cloak Lane as if treading on air, and entered the office with a manner of being at peace with the whole world, which, in a person of so remarkable an appearance, might have been accounted as infinitely humble.

It produced no impression, however, save one of irritation on a man who was standing with his back to the empty fire-grate—a middle-aged, middle-sized, stiffly built man, with short black hair, keen dark eyes, clean shaven face, and broad, capable forehead.

“I have a word to say to you,” he began, addressing Mr. Tripsdale.

“Say on,” returned that irrepressible individual, hanging up his hat, and then standing at ease till the other should have finished.

“It is this. The next time I find you lying in wait for one of our clients, and ear-wigging him, you’ll go out of that door quicker than you ever came into it—not to enter this office again.”

“Oh! you’re head boss here now, are you? It is as well to know.”

“I am boss enough for that, at any rate,” retorted the first speaker. “You would not have been here so long if Mr. Desborne had listened to my advice.”

“I am quite aware of that, thank you.”

“Anyone but yourself might have rested satisfied with insulting Miss Fermoy. You, however, must in addition needs go and chatter about her affairs to her friend.”

"How clever we are."

"If you give me much more impudence I will lay the whole thing before Mr. Desborne the moment he comes in."

"You will do that anyhow."

"Grin as much as you like, you will find this morning's work turn out no laughing matter."

"Well, well. Shut up now. If I am to be hung, drawn, and quartered, at least spare me an oration," and with this remark Mr. Tripsdale was about to exchange his out of door coat for one which hung on a peg close to where his adversary stood, when that individual in an access of wrath exclaimed :

"You, you mountebank, how dare you disgrace a respectable office by wearing such clothes! You look more like a clown at a circus than a decent clerk."

Mr. Tripsdale left the pepper-and-salt coat he had been about to take down still hanging on its accustomed peg, while he turned and faced his opponent.

"What is the matter with my clothes?" he asked, casting an affectionate glance over his new suit. "They are a precious sight better than yours—and they are paid for, which, if all I can hear is true, Mr. Knevitt could not truthfully say about his."

"You infernal young liar, what do you mean by that?"

"Fish and find out," was the cool reply. "You know so well what Mr. Vernham and I were talking about that you will have no difficulty in learning what the talk is about you."

"I don't owe a penny in the world."

"That is what you say."

"No one can say anything else."

"What is the disturbance," asked a voice at this juncture, and looking round both the disputants beheld Mr. Edward Desborne, who had just returned, surveying his belligerent clerks with grave and annoyed surprise.

Mr. Tripsdale did not speak. "It was not my

place," he explained afterward to Mr. Puckle, for which reason he contented himself with "watching the case."

As for Mr. Knevitt, he was in such a white heat of rage that he could not for an instant find words to answer.

"Have you been quarrelling?" went on Mr. Desborne, in a tone almost of incredulity.

Mr. Knevitt involuntarily moistened his parched lips with the tip of his tongue. Mr. Tripsdale, still watching his own case, continued to maintain an impartial silence.

"I had occasion to find fault with this young fellow," said the elder clerk at last, "and he answered in the most impudent manner."

Mr. Desborne looked at the offender, who neither answered "Guilty" nor "Not guilty," only in silence sucked the tip of the office ruler as though smoking a calumet. He was reserving his defence.

"You see he will not speak, sir," added Mr. Knevitt in explanation and accusation.

Still Mr. Tripsdale kept silence.

"What was his offence, Knevitt—something heinous, eh?" asked Mr. Desborne. "It must have been—you were talking so very loud."

"He accused me of being in debt, and I do not owe a farthing in the world."

"You ought to be a very happy man then," observed his employer.

"I am a very happy man," returned the clerk with an expression which belied his words. "But happy though I be, I do not intend to put up with impudence from a lad like that."

"He called me a mountebank, sir," said Mr. Tripsdale, with a graceful wave of the ruler, "and found fault with my clothes."

"What is wrong with his clothes?" asked Mr. Desborne, kindly, rejoiced to think the young clerk's sin was of no more deadly nature.

"Why, sir, only look at them. I wonder what your honored father would have thought if I ventured to appear before him in such motley——"

"Things have changed a good deal since you first came to my father, Knevitt," answered Mr. Desborne, kindly; "and as for Tripsdale's suit, I dare say he will find it very cool and comfortable during the hot weather."

"But you have not seen his hat, sir," persisted Mr. Knevitt. "Put it on."

Like many amiable people, Mr. Desborne was not blessed or cursed with a keen sense of humor. Had he been, the spectacle of Mr. Tripsdale, with his arms held stiffly to his side at "attention," and a martial frown on his brow, scowling at Mr. Knevitt from under the shadow of that broad-brimmed gray hat, must have proved irresistible.

"Rather Quaker-like, perhaps," said Mr. Desborne; "but it too, doubtless, proves pleasant wear on a sunny day, such as this, for instance."

"Will you please tell Mr. Knevitt, sir, to put on his hat now for you to see," said Mr. Tripsdale, with an air of aggrieved dignity.

"It is not necessary," answered Mr. Desborne; "I know Mr. Knevitt's hat quite well," and he moved as if to go, when the managing clerk detained him.

"I hope you do not imagine, sir," he began, "that the matter in dispute between us had anything really to do with dress. That was merely a side issue—the other affair is much more serious. Had Tripsdale received my warning as it was meant I probably might not have troubled you; but his impertinence leaves me no choice. I have a most grave complaint to make against him."

"Pray, then, let us hear it at once," said Mr. Desborne, impatiently.

"When he heard Mr. Vernham was with you to-day his interest seemed so much excited that I confess I felt surprised, but as he often is excited, I thought no

more about the matter, till on turning out of Cannon Street on my way back from Abchurch Lane I saw this promising youth walking down Dowgate Hill by the side of Mr. Vernham, and talking to him in the most confidential manner. Their conversation lasted—for I felt it was my duty to follow—till they parted by the Lantern Church. They were a long time together—made many pauses, and spoke, as I could see, eagerly, no doubt, on the subject which brought Mr. Vernham here.”

Mr. Desborne looked vexed.

“I am sorry,” he said. “It is very strange. It sounds very unpleasant, but it may be capable of explanation. Is Mr. Knevitt correct in what he tells me, Tripsdale, or has he made any mistake?”

“He is quite correct in many respects, sir. I did wait outside till Mr. Vernham left you, and I did walk with him to St. Dunstan’s in the East.”

“Had you any previous acquaintance with the gentleman?”

“I never had the honor, sir, of seeing Mr. Vernham till to-day.”

“You see, out of his own mouth he stands condemned,” remarked Mr. Knevitt, eagerly. Upon hearing which observation, Mr. Tripsdale thrust the ruler again between his teeth, as if resolved nothing further of an incriminatory nature should proceed from the source indicated.

“He may not have been talking, however, about Miss Fermoy,” said Mr. Desborne, amiably, anxious to find some loophole of escape for his erring clerk.

“Were you, Tripsdale?”

The young fellow shook his head.

“Don’t you believe him, sir!” exclaimed Mr. Knevitt, eagerly translating the shake as a falsehood for the benefit of all whom the matter may concern. “I know all about it as well as if”—I had been down him with a light, the senior was going to say, but substituted—“I had heard every word of the interview,”

just in time. "Remembering how impertinent he had been to Miss Fermoy, he thought to make it all right by currying favor with Mr. Vernham, and telling him the amount of her fortune and other particulars you deemed it best to defer mentioning to the lady."

"Live and learn," muttered Mr. Tripsdale, *sotto voce*.

"What do you mean by saying Tripsdale was impertinent to Miss Fermoy? I trust you are not laboring under some mistake."

"Not at all, sir; not at all," answered Mr. Knevitt, briskly, feeling he was now walking on solid ground. "When the lady called he insulted her most grossly. Did not he, Mr. Puckle?"

"Oh, come now, draw it mild," expostulated Mr. Puckle, under his breath, but otherwise he made no reply, good or bad.

Mr. Desborne looked at his subordinates as if unable to believe the evidence of his senses.

"I really am astonished," he said, "not only to hear that Mr. Tripsdale so far forgot himself as to be rude to any client—more especially a woman; but to find the circumstance was not reported to my uncle or me at once."

"Well, sir, you see we do not care to make mischief!" exclaimed Mr. Knevitt, a little crestfallen.

"You do, at any rate," retorted Mr. Tripsdale, turning upon him; "and I did not insult Miss Fermoy; I did not say a disrespectful word to her. Did I, Mr. Puckle?"

Poor Mr. Puckle—keeping one watchful eye on the door in order to intercept the entrance of any stranger, and the other turned in the direction of Mr. Knevitt, who refused to see his mute appeal—found himself in a very tight corner.

He, at all events, had not intended to make mischief, and only told Mr. Knevitt about their Whit-Tuesday incident that morning, as somehow or other, sooner or later, an adverse fate compelled him to tell Mr. Knevitt everything; therefore he was quite unprepared for the

violence of the storm now pelting about his ears. Driven to desperation between Scylla and Charybdis the unfortunate man answered :

"It was not exactly what you said, of course, but the way you said it."

Mr. Tripsdale was quite shrewd enough to grasp the length, depth, and width of his perilous situation.

Puckle was not going to stand by his friend, so he could only fight as one who has no ally.

"I confess I chaffed her," he admitted, with the air of a prince pleading guilty to chucking a chambermaid under the chin ; "but I meant no harm, and how could I know her for other than what she seemed?"

"What do you mean by saying you 'chaffed her?'" asked Mr. Desborne with a sternness unusual to his manner.

"Nothing wrong, sir, I assure you, upon my sacred word and honor. It all happened this way. Let Mr. Knevitt say what he likes—she—Miss Fermoy—came in here the morning after Whit-Monday—a very awkward morning indeed—asking to see Mr. Desborne. She would not give her name or address or state her business, and it was not my fault if I took her for a barrow girl. You did yourself, Mr. Puckle."

"Don't appeal to me!" exclaimed Mr. Puckle. "I took her for nothing, and answered her according!"

"You see, sir," said Mr. Tripsdale, apologetically triumphant. "I hope you will not think I am taking a liberty if I venture to suggest that probably, when you met Miss Fermoy, it did not occur even to you that she was connected with the Upper Ten Thousand."

"It did not," answered Mr. Desborne, overlooking the freedom of Mr. Tripsdale's remark in his desire to deal justly ; "but she was a woman, and as such was entitled to all courtesy."

He paused. A total silence ensued then.

"I shall overlook the grave faults you have been guilty of on this occasion ; but must warn you to be

careful in your conduct for the future," he added, before entering his own office, the door of which he closed, leaving the three clerks together.

Without hesitating for a moment, Mr. Tripsdale walked to the door and knocked.

"Come in," said Mr. Desborne. "Oh! it is you, Tripsdale, is it? I really think you had better not say anything more——"

"I must say something more, sir. I can't sit down patiently under Mr. Knevitt's accusation without uttering a word in my own defence. He has long been wanting to get his knife into me, and——"

"That will do, that will do," interrupted Mr. Desborne. "You had every chance given you of offering an explanation, and it was your own fault that you refused to give one. I cannot reopen the question."

"Sir—Mr. Desborne—you have been always fair to me. I know you will be fair now. I could not and would not defend myself from such an accusation with Mr. Knevitt, who is always down upon me, standing there. I have never told you an untruth; I am not in the habit of telling untruths, and I assure you solemnly that Miss Fermoy's name was never mentioned between me and Mr. Vernham. Till Mr. Knevitt stated the fact I was not aware Mr. Vernham knew her. I waited for him outside, I admit, and spoke to him, but only to express my gratitude for an act of kindness he did my brother, who is—delicate."

"I am sorry, Tripsdale, you felt unable to say this earlier."

"You don't believe me, sir—will you ask Mr. Vernham? He would tell you the same. As for talking office affairs out of the office, I have never done so; honor is honor, and a clerk may possess as keen a sense of it as an archbishop."

During all the years Mr. Desborne's firm had been privileged to pay Mr. Tripsdale a salary, the head of it had never heard that individual make so long a speech; his answer usually being wellnigh confined to the

scriptural "yea" and "nay," and it may at once be said the speech did not produce a good impression.

"I shall certainly not mention the subject to Mr. Vernham," Mr. Desborne returned, coldly. "I am willing to take your word in the matter, and only wish you could have given an equally emphatic denial to the charge of having treated Miss Fermoy with discourtesy."

"I did not mean to be discourteous, sir, and I don't think I was—exactly. I chaffed her certainly, but not in the way you suppose. I should think very little of myself if I spoke disrespectfully even to a gutter girl."

"Clearly understand in this office I expect civility to be shown to the poorest and lowest creature who walks the London pavements. If I hear another complaint of your behavior I shall have to speak more severely."

"But, sir, I was civil, only I talked perhaps a little over her head, and I am sorry for it—very sorry."

"That is sufficient; do not let such a thing occur again; now we will say no more concerning this unpleasant affair," and Mr. Desborne made a sign of dismissal which the offender felt bound to obey, though his heart was full to overflowing of unuttered explanations.

It was so full, and he felt his employer's reproof so keenly, that without addressing one word to Mr. Puckle, who looked up as though expecting some communication, he went straight to his desk and indited the following epistle:

"TO EDWARD DESBORNE, Esq.,

"Solicitor, Cloak Lane.

"HONORED SIR—As it is obvious that I have had the misfortune to lose your confidence, I feel there is but one course open—namely, to resign my situation, which I now do, and with your kind permission will leave as soon as you have found someone to fill my place more efficiently. Your very obedient servant,

"FERDINAND TRIPSDALE."

It must not be supposed that this business-like "notice to quit" sprang into life from Mr. Tripsdale's brain in the perfect form presented. Many sheets of office note-paper were spoiled ere the above result was arrived at, a fair letter written, and a true copy made.

After these things were done, the communication for Mr. Desborne placed in a directed envelope, and the duplicate folded up and put in his own inner pocket, the young clerk laid all the "waste" in the empty grate, set a match to it, and watched till not a tell-tale atom remained behind; then he knocked again on the panel of his employer's door and waited. No answer came, so he went in, left the note where it would be seen immediately anyone entered, and came out again, with the look of a person who has passed the Rubicon, and is, though determined, sorry.

He was very sorry. He thoroughly realized what he had done. He had never been in another situation. "Desborne's was home to him," as he mentally put it—board, lodging, washing, and fuel—and now he would have to search for the wherewithal to provide those necessities elsewhere. He would have to consort with strange people and get into the ways of unfamiliar offices, and this was worse than anything; he would be obliged to tell his brother what had happened—that brother he tried to spare as a mother might her child.

His heart was very sore and heavy within him as he seated himself again on his stool and resumed the work he had left in order to waylay Mr. Vernham.

"Much of a row?" asked Mr. Puckle, whose curiosity would not allow him to refrain from questioning any longer.

"No; dismissed with a caution," answered Mr. Tripsdale, airily.

"What were you writing that brief about, then?"

"My own business," was the reply.

"You might tell me."

"I might, but I won't. I am not going to tell you anything again, ever."

"Please yourself."

"That is just what I intend to do."

Time went on, and as it went Mr. Tripsdale's heart grew heavier. He worked like a very demon in his endeavor to kill thought, and leaving Mr. Puckle to answer all inquiries, devoted himself to making up arrears in a manner which amazed his slower companion.

It was when he was most deeply engaged that Mr. Knevitt entered, and, throwing a letter down on his desk, said—"Take that to Chancery Lane, and bring back an answer."

"Take it yourself," retorted Mr. Tripsdale; "I am not your ticket porter."

Mr. Knevitt looked at him for a moment, with the expression of one longing for a fight, then picked up the letter and left the office.

"You are doing it effectually," observed Mr. Puckle, who could not see such things done and keep silence.

"Doing what?"

"Cutting your own throat."

Presently there sounded a muffled whistle.

"Yes, sir," said Mr. Puckle, whose desk was close to the tube, to which he immediately applied his ear.

"You are wanted upstairs," he observed to Mr. Tripsdale, taking his ear from the tube.

Mr. Tripsdale descended from his stool, and marching out of the office defiantly, mounted to the first floor, where he found Mr. Edward Desborne and his uncle.

His own missive was lying open before the latter gentleman, who said, in a calm, dispassionate tone:

"Tripsdale, we have decided to return this letter into your own hands, and I will tell you the why. If we allow you to go we must state the reason to anyone that may apply to us, and it would do you harm. Do not be foolish—do not allow your temper to get the better of your judgment. We are all liable to make mistakes, and the best thing to do is to try to avoid making them in the future. Now you can go,"

with which curt dismissal Mr. Tripsdale was departing as meekly as a lamb, when the speaker added—"Oh! just one thing more. Look through your wardrobe this evening, and try to find a suit better adapted for city work than the one you have been wearing lately. That is all."

Mr. Tripsdale went out and stood on the landing speechless with rage—stood biting his nails savagely and lifting one foot and then the other, in a desperate effort to refrain from executing a war-dance.

"Checkmate, by Jove!" he muttered. "Checkmate." He was quite clever enough to grasp the situation instantly.

"If *I* give *them* notice," he thought, "they will say I left in a fit of temper because I did not like my dress being interfered with; and if I don't put on different clothes, *they* will give *me* notice. Hang it all! I can't throw up my berth over a summer suit," and he slowly began to descend the staircase, grasping the baluster rail tightly, as if it had offended him.

"Never mind, Mr. Knevitt, never mind," he finished. "My day will come, and when it does I won't forget you—oh, dear no!" which mental exclamation afforded him so much satisfaction that he went down the remainder of the flight in double-quick time, and re-entered the clerks' office in the character of "Richard is himself again!"

CHAPTER VIII.

A STRANGE INTERIOR.

When Philip Vernham, on the following evening, entered Bartholomew Square the first person he saw was Mr. Ferdinand Tripsdale clothed in sad attire and quite in his right mind.

"I thought you might have a trouble in finding our number," he said, raising his hat ceremoniously, "so took the liberty of waiting about for you. Gus wanted to come and wait about too, but I would not let him. He is not over strong," after which utterance he relapsed into silence with the view of permitting Mr. Vernham's fascinated gaze to wander over the beauties of Bartholomew Square.

"I did not imagine there was such a quiet nook hidden away here," remarked that gentleman.

"It is a curious thing and one I have often noticed," answered Mr. Tripsdale, pacing along with the air of a guide personally conducting some prince of the blood through a strange country, "that no matter how well a man knows his London he never knows it thoroughly. It is a city of surprises. Why even I, who know its nooks and corners as well as I do my alphabet, am always coming across something new. It was only the other day I tumbled over, as I may say, six dolls' houses—alms, you know—such tiny bits of places, with green cottage doors, flowers in the window, and all the rest of it, just at the back of Moorgate Street—that I have never seen before. This way, if you please, sir," and, indicating an open door, he escorted his visitor up two flights of stairs, and entering a front room on

the second floor, exclaimed—"Gus, who do you think this is?"

A young fellow with a pale sweet face came shyly forward and said—"Mr. Vernham, is it really you?"

That was all, but his eyes were beaming with joy, and the hand he offered trembling with pleasurable excitement.

"Where will you sit?" asked the younger brother, as their visitor stood silent, vainly searching for something to say. "Where will you sit?" with the satisfied air of one who feels he owns a vista of "marble halls" and hundreds of "vassals and serfs to command."

He had noted the effect their second floor front had produced on Mr. Vernham and felt wild with rapture.

"Thank you, anywhere," replied Aileen's friend, taking the nearest chair. "What a delightful room this is; you must forgive me for making such a remark."

"You think it really passable?" said Mr. Ferdinand Tripsdale.

"I think it really lovely," was the reply.

"It is all his doing," declared the elder brother.

"It is all Gussy's doing," affirmed the other.

"I do not know when I saw such beautiful old furniture," observed Mr. Vernham.

"Got for a mere song," explained Mr. Ferdinand Tripsdale. "Mind, though, it was not like this when we bought it. The way we did the trick—but possibly I weary you, sir?"

"On the contrary, I am immensely interested."

"When we came here, just six years ago, we had nothing but a few cane chairs, the table you see (indicating a heavy oblong oak table, black with age, standing on legs that looked like thick black rope loosely twisted, rising from an under framework of the same pattern), and the chair you are sitting on, which I hope you find comfortable."

"I do, indeed," and Philip Vernham rose in order to view the piece of furniture in question, which was

exceedingly tall and straight in the back, and even more remarkably nobbly and corded about the legs, than its friend the table, and seemed, moreover, afflicted in every possible joint with chalk stones. "A divine chair, a chair for Art to rave about!"

"When Gus got into regular work," proceeded Mr. Tripsdale, "and my salary was raised a bit, the question arose whether we ought not to begin to furnish. We both thought it would only be right, but our views were different. My view was the walnut wood suit—Gussy's wasn't, so he undertook to 'educate my taste.' This is the result."

"You could not have a more charming result," said Mr. Vernham, looking round a room wainscoted in oak up to about three feet from the floor, and above divided into panels, the centres of which were painted a cool, subdued color, while the dividing portions matched the wainscot. In each division hung an ancient engraving or piece of quaint embroidery, and the whole effect, if not in accordance with the canons of true art, was pleasantly like art, and sufficiently suggestive to remind an on-looker thankfully of modest old-world homes, where lavender bags scented the linen press and all fragrant herbs and useful cordials found their place in the housewife's cupboard.

"I can't say those nobbly things are exactly my style, even after all the time Gus has spent upon educating me," proceeded the younger brother; "but I don't think them as strange as I used to do, and as I see the same sort often in pictures, I suppose it is quite right. We've had an enormous amount of fun over our house-furnishing anyhow—we've been to all sorts and sizes of places, and met with many queer characters. Down at the East End, among the small dealers, we picked up most of what you see for as many shillings as we should have paid pounds west of Holborn. Often we hired a truck and brought them home ourselves, had them scrubbed, and then set to work to put a new face upon them. The samplers and worsted

pictures are sent to the cleaner. Polly says we ought to be burnt out so as to clear all this rubbish away, but I don't see that myself. I like to look at them, if only to remind me of the nights we walked through Bow and Bromley and Stratford, keeping our eyes open. Why, this room is as good as a diary to me—that is the way I put it to Polly—but, bless you, there is no convincing women!”

“Is Polly your sister?” asked Mr. Vernham.

“My sister-in-law who is to be,” amended Mr. Tripsdale.

“Indeed! is that so?” and Mr. Vernham looked at the elder brother, who remarked, with a smile:

“According to Reggie. I think, however, he had better marry her himself.”

“My future wife's name will not be Polly, but Success,” declared Reggie, with an emphasis which surprised the visitor. “I shall woo no bride except Miss Getting-on-in-the-world. I mean to make money—lots of it, and you, Gus, must win fame and carry on the family.”

“And how do you propose to make lots of money?” asked Mr. Vernham, really interested to hear.

“Well, sir, I don't mean to remain a clerk all my life. There will be some money coming to us one of these days—it does not depend on anybody's caprice or will that can be fought over, but it must come on to Bartholomew Square when our great-grand-aunt retires from this world to a better. I am sure I don't wish anyone to die, but still, when an old lady has had the enjoyment of money for over ninety-seven years, and can find nothing else to do in life save sucking her gums, which have long been toothless, I say it is time for her to take a front seat in heaven, where none of the family believe they will ever meet us.”

“Why?” asked Mr. Vernham.

“First and foremost, because we must have £2,000, which is so splendidly invested that it returns £130 a year; second, and as a sort of clincher to the first, be-

cause Gus is going to be an artist and I a lawyer ; and, third, in the way of 'summing up,' because we are both too uppish—just fancy poor Gus 'uppish.'"

"I can't really," said Mr. Vernham, with a smile.

"You see, our great-grand-uncle, who probably knew his wife better than most men, forecasting what would happen, left his money to her only for life. After his death she remarried almost immediately and had a large fine family, and you may imagine there would be a nice complication were the money at her disposal, which it is not ; and that is what makes all her sons and daughters so mad.

"In the ordinary course of nature our father ought to have had that £2,000 years and years ago, but the old lady held on. When I think of all the good he could have done for himself and others had she slid off when she was about seventy-eight, I feel inclined to doubt whether Providence takes so accurate a view of family affairs as might be wished. Gus tells me I am cross, and that I ought not to say such things, but I can't think I am so very far out after all."

"You are," said the elder brother with more firmness than Mr. Vernham could have given him credit for, "you are indeed, Reggie. Supposing anyone spoke in that tone about our father how, should you have liked it? Besides," he added with a twinkle in his eyes, "to put the matter on no higher ground, it is foolish to say such things. We had figuratively the old door shut in our faces in consequence of just such a speech ; and Elder Farm is a pleasant place to go to," at which thought the lad sighed. "Some persons' lives do not hold the memory of so many pleasant places that they can scarcely see one closed to them without regret."

"It is a pleasant enough place, especially about Christmas time," confessed Mr. Tripsdale, manifestly disconcerted by his brother's statement. "Gus got his taste for old oak then," he continued, addressing their visitor. "Lord, you should see the kitchen fire-

place with dogs and settles round, and great pots that might have served Jack the Giant Killer's giant to boil his victuals in. There are cupboards in that house, and buffets, and arm-chairs, I am told, that could not be matched in England, and Gus is right enough. I did say what slammed the door in our faces, and yet it was not much after all. An old gentleman last Christmas year began maundering about the fine voice our great-grand-aunt rejoiced in when she was a girl, and I could not help saying, as our great-grand-aunt had rejoiced in such a voice so long ago, 'I thought it was high time for her to secure a permanent engagement in the Celestial Choir,' which chance remark, of course, went round the family like wild-fire, with the result Gus indicated."

"Well, of course it was not quite nice," persisted the elder brother; "anyone hearing such a remark might have imagined you wished her dead."

"That was just what she said, and when I declared I hoped she would live to dance on our graves, told me I was telling—well, she put it forcibly—lies."

"I suppose she was pretty nearly right," observed Mr. Vernham.

"No, I don't want her to die. She is welcome to live another hundred years for me, but I should like some of that money before Gus and I arrive at an age when we can do nothing but sink our graves and make ourselves disagreeable."

"People can make themselves disagreeable at any age. It is not necessary to be ninety-seven to do that," said Gus.

"I had better change the subject, perhaps," returned his brother, with a good-tempered laugh. "Show Mr. Vernham some of your fancies, Michael Angelo. Now, don't be shy," he added. "You order him to open his portfolio, sir. He will do what you tell him."

"I should like greatly to see a few of your sketches," began the visitor, who having noted with dismay that an abundant tea was laid for three persons, had been

considering for some time how he could most easily and quickly effect his exit. "I am rather pressed for time ; but if you could favor me with a peep at drawings it would gratify me very much."

"Please do not talk of running away yet, sir," interposed Mr. Desborne's clerk, "or I shall think I have frightened you with my foolish talk. You must have tea somewhere, Mr. Vernham, and Gus and I hoped you would excuse our freedom if we asked you to have a cup with us. As I said before, you need not be afraid of our intruding. We are not people who want to take an ell if anyone gives us an inch, but we should esteem it an honor if you could have your meal with us."

"I should be a churl if I refused," answered Mr. Vernham, immeasurably relieved, for he had been expecting the advent of Polly or someone else equally objectionable, and to know the lads had kept faith with him and had spread a feast in his honor seemed pleasant to the man so few, so very few delighted to consider.

"We thank you," said Mr. Reginald Tripsdale, with the air of a Grandison, "though it is only what we might have expected. Now, Gus, look alive," he went on in a quite different tone, "produce your wares and show your samples ; at last a judge is going to inspect them."

"Indeed, I am no judge," declared Philip Vernham very earnestly. "I do not know much about pictures ; I only know what I like."

"Pressing a case," was the reply, "I know what I like, and that is Gussy's work. We are not always at one on the old oak question, but when he gets among the trees and the fairies I say nothing can beat him, and you'll say the same, sir, or I'm a Dutchman."

"Reggie, why will you trouble Mr. Vernham about our poor sketches," remonstrated Reginald's brother ; "I am sure he cannot——"

"I am sure he can and will," interposed Mr. Trips-

dale. "Do you suppose he ever would have come here only to listen to our babble? Well, if you won't show him yourself, I will."

"Just come here, Mr. Vernham," and Mr. Tripsdale led the visitor behind a screen which shut the farther window off from the rest of the room, making an apartment within an apartment, which, though only furnished with a small table and office chair, an easel, and a stand containing flowers, seemed delightfully quaint and charming. "This is where he does his engraving," said Reginald, indicating the table, "and there he puts his fancies on paper," indicating the easel.

"Is that fancy?" asked Mr. Vernham, pointing to a portrait which seemed to smile sadly at him as he stepped within the screen. "What a lovely face."

"No," answered the artist, who had followed the speaker with a face more flushed and a gait more tardy than usual. "I forgot I had left her there. That is Reggie's sister-in-law, who is *not* to be."

"She is very beautiful."

"It is not a bit like her," said Mr. Tripsdale. "She laughs at it herself. Who wants a wife with such a die-away, broken-hearted look as that girl has? I just think I see Polly going about the streets wearing such a hat and such a Norah Creina dress, and carrying a bushel measure full of water-lilies in her arms. 'No, you couldn't catch me making such a guy of myself,' she said the other day. Here is the real Polly."

Philip took the photograph presented to him and examined it curiously. The likeness was that of a comely, good-humored, practical sort of girl, with regular features and a peculiarly decided and determined expression pervading her appearance. Her dress fitted like a glove; there was not a crease or fold about it. Her fringe was carefully curled, and the remainder of her hair piled scientifically on the top of her head. Not a lock was out of place; not a plait in her gown but looked as if it had been constructed with the aid

of a plumb-line. Every button of her bodice came out clearly as though each had been touched up separately. She was a good type of the London girl of her period in the class to which she belonged—self-satisfied, capable, industrious, hard, honest, able to take care of herself, and possibly of others; but she was not the girl who smiled sadly from the easel—mournfully, and with a wistful tenderness Polly's face had never known.

Yet Philip Vernham could trace a likeness, a subtle indefinable likeness which seemed wonderful to him. The maiden who held those fair water-lilies still dripping from their river home, who had every grace of form and face, the pliant figure, the soft suggested movements which the old artists understood so well that give an added charm to the fairest woman, never could have resembled that smart, tidy, well-dressed, conscious Polly the photographer's skill had reproduced with such cruel accuracy; but still there was a likeness, which might have been of the spirit imprisoned within buxom Polly's fleshly tabernacle.

"I do not understand where you got this girl," said the visitor, after a long wondering look at the face which seemed mystified also.

"I got her from Polly," answered the painter.

"Yes—but——" and Mr. Vernham hesitated.

"Have you never seen, when talking to some friend, an expression quite unfamiliar come into his countenance and change it?"

"I have—an unpleasant expression," answered the visitor, at which reply Mr. Reginald Tripsdale laughed appreciatively.

"Ah! when you have been arguing or quarrelling perhaps," said Augustus Tripsdale, who had forgotten his shyness in that earnest belief in his art which carries true workers over "brake, bush, and scaur."

"But that is not what I mean. When sitting quietly, you and a friend together—you and he, perhaps, not even speaking—have you never noticed an expression sweep across his face, a look leap into his eyes, or some

unwonted feeling part his lips, which changed him for the moment almost into another person ? ”

Philip Vernham shook his head.

“You must have seen,” persisted the other, “but perhaps you did not notice ; that is the difference between artists and most people. What I mean is, sometimes a window generally closed and curtained seems suddenly to be flung wide, and the soul looks out for a moment ; the soul as God made it, but which has got housed, to our thinking, unworthily. You do not understand me yet, I see. Well, I will put the case differently,” and the bright, clever eyes and the eager, sensitive face were turned to the non-comprehending visitor, while Reginald Tripsdale exclaimed delightedly :

“He is on his hobby-horse now, Mr. Vernham. After all, Gussie, I am not the only one in the world who is unable to follow you.”

“Mr. Vernham will follow me presently,” returned the lad, whose soul had found so poor a mortal lodging. “Have you ever,” he went on, addressing their visitor, “seen some rough, untutored fellow stretched on a bed of sickness, ill unto death ? No ? Then what am I to do ? How shall I explain ? ”

“Just talk on,” suggested Mr. Vernham ; “tell me what you have seen and thought, and though I am very dense, no doubt I shall grasp your meaning presently.”

“It is I who am obscure,” said the young artist, humbly ; “but I will try to be plainer, for I should like you to think with me. I said a minute ago some rough, untutored fellow, and I have seen that too ; but what I had particularly in my mind was a rough, loud-voiced, coarse-featured trashwoman, the least lovely creature externally I ever beheld, though possessed of a heart of gold. When she lay a-dying I went to see her, and I never was so amazed. Coming death succeeded in effacing all the hard lines a hard life had graven on her face. Her skin was like that of a little child, the

wasted hand she held out was soft and white as the most delicate lady's, and in the eyes I remembered so dull and weary there shone the light of God's eternal peace. I have seen in dying people that marvellous change over and over again."

Mr. Vernham stood thoughtful. He was considering. He was better born, better bred, better nurtured than the youth who spoke. He was the son of a clergyman. Such sights as Augustus Tripsdale talked of ought to have been familiar to him, yet he had never seen the things referred to. Was he of those who having eyes see not, and having ears hear not? A very serious question to propound to himself in the case of any man, and doubly serious in the case of such a man as Philip Vernham, who had hitherto gone through the world little satisfied with other people, while much, though unconsciously, satisfied with himself.

"Your idea is," he at last said, slowly, "that most men have two natures, one which their fellows see and another of which an occasional glimpse is only caught."

"Yes, that is my idea," agreed the young fellow, pleased at being understood so far, and confident Mr. Vernham would grasp the further belief involved in his fancy when he thought the matter more fully out.

"And you saw this face," indicating the lovely maiden with such sad, tender eyes, "looking out of Miss Polly's open window?"

"No, I won't go so far as that," answered the artist. "If I had"—and he stopped, but Philip Vernham comprehended he might but for his brother's presence have added, "I should have tried to win her."

"I saw something which inspired the picture," he went on, feeling the pause awkward. "I am so glad you like it."

"Indeed, I do," said Mr. Vernham.

"As a fancy sketch, it is all very well," interposed Reginald Tripsdale, "but for practical purposes, for a good daughter, a capital manager, a shrewd young woman, a jolly, sensible, companionable girl, give me

Polly ; no nonsense about her, no die-away, lackadaisical rubbish there—a practical, useful, helpful, economical girl, Mr. Vernham, just the wife to keep things together for a foolish, dreamy, clever young idiot like Gussy. Whenever she has ten minutes to spare she comes here to keep him straight.”

“She does,” said Gussy, “and I often wish she would keep away. If she would come when you are at home I should not mind, but she does hinder me so.”

Here was a state of innocence which Mr. Vernham surveyed in dismay—a nineteenth century Garden of Eden before the fall that seemed impossible to his sophisticated imagination.

A buxom, healthy, capable, young girl paying visits to a solitary young man all “her lone ;” lecturing him, advising him, making love to him no doubt. Truly there were things in London a good deal beyond “his” philosophy.

“She has always been like a sister to us,” explained the younger brother ; “she blows up our charwoman, mends our linen, interviews our laundress—we could not get on without Polly. How the deuce she finds time for all the work she gets through I can’t imagine. She nurses her mother, who is delicate ; keeps her father straight, who is an old fool ; sees to her young brothers and sisters, and really runs a lodging-house in Claremont Square, which keeps the family. No wonder Gussy’s ‘beauty’ disgusts her. With a face like that at the head of affairs the family would be in the Bankruptcy Court within a twelve month. But all this is outside Gussy’s work. Look here, Mr. Vernham.”

“Do you mean to say you have evolved all these sketches out of your own imagination ?” asked Philip Vernham fifteen minutes later in that, to him, eventful evening.

“The ideas, ‘yes ;’ the adjuncts, ‘no,’” was the reply. “The scenery is all taken from the Upper Thames, the ‘little people’ and their doings *came to me.*”

"How do you mean 'came to you?'"

"Precisely what I say. You do not know the lovely notions which come to me when lying awake at night, while Reggie is like Miss Flanagan in the Irish ballad, 'sound asleep and snoring.'"

"I beg to say," interposed Reggie, with dignity, "that I lie awake o' nights also, considering my future position as Solicitor-General."

"He sleeps like a top, Mr. Vernham."

"So would you if you had as much on your mind as I have on mine," was the quick, if inconsequent, retort.

"Well, as I haven't, I lie awake," answered his brother, "and see many things feebly reproduced. There I see the trembling leaves; I see the water-lilies springing up after fairy feet have pressed them. I know why the grass by the river's edge looks trampled in the morning, and who has gathered the wild flowers in Runnymede over night. I could tell you where the good people have been holding high festival, and mark the precise spot where the witches last met."

Philip Vernham looked at the speaker in amazement.

Were such fancies possible in Bartholomew Square, where dwelt tailors, bootmakers, watchmakers, and such like?

Could genius dwell there too and lie awake o' nights garnering its wondrous fantasies? It seemed so, though the fact appeared incredible.

"Come and have some tea, Mr. Vernham," said the practical Reginald. "After that lot of idealism I should think you must be hungry. I hope you will like our tea. We get it from a friend in the trade. Those strawberries grow in a market garden down east, where the proprietor lets Gus gather for himself. The cake and ham are of Polly's providing, so I need say nothing about them."

"Is it not very early for strawberries?" asked the visitor.

"Yes, rather, I imagine," answered Gus, who was careful not to say those he had bought were forced,

and then they sat round the table, Reginald acting as host, and the meal began.

It was a much better meal than Mr. Vernham would have had at home. The rate of exchange in London, as between landlady and lodger, tells heavily against the latter, and even if this were not so how is a man to pay for his rooms, light, fire, and dress out of thirty shillings a week, and live luxuriously on the balance left?

Yet the Tripsdales on their joint incomes managed to live well and save money also.

“When my aunt, that is, our mother’s sister, died—she was housekeeper to a wine merchant, whose stores and offices were in Norton Folgate, and we had leave to stay there with her—when she died, Gus and I had many a talk about what we ought to do. We felt we could not stand lodgings, furnished or unfurnished. My aunt’s illness and funeral had eaten up her little savings, and even when we sold her few possessions, all except the articles I indicated some time ago, there was still a deficit, which we paid off at so much a week out of our earnings.”

“Reggie paid it, Mr. Vernham ; I was earning almost nothing then.”

“You have earned plenty and paid plenty since,” said Reggie, with a courtly wave of his hand ; “but, as I was remarking, we had many a talk about the best course to pursue. The remuneration of a lad in a lawyer’s office is never princely, and I may say at once we found that a very hard winter ; two or three times we were in an exceedingly tight place. It so happened I had to come into this square, and as I looked round me I saw chalked on the window of this very room ‘To let.’ Well, to cut a long story short, we took it the same evening, and moved in next day. That was how we began housekeeping, with one room, doing for ourselves ; now we have three rooms and a charwoman to tidy up, and feel, I assure you, as grand as though we had chambers in the Temple, and an old laundress

to manage that our tea does not last too long, and all the rest of what is called respectability. We could afford now to take real chambers in one of the smaller inns, but we have got fond of Bartholomew Square and think it better to save our halfpence than to spend them. Gus is in one building society, I am in another; that is not a bad way of putting money by. Mrs. Pring may live to grace Elder Farm for half a century yet, and if Gus is to go to Rome and I am to become a solicitor we shall have to save a lot of pennies."

"Are you going to Rome?" asked Mr. Vernham, turning to the young artist.

"Some day, perhaps," he answered.

"Some day, no 'perhaps' at all," interposed Reginald. "I can wait a while for my chance. I do not mean him to wait one day beyond the time we can see our way clear."

"And you really intend to be a solicitor?"

"I do. It is not precisely what I should have chosen, but I have thought it all out, and believe the calling to which my taste would have inclined me would not do. Certainly it would not do."

Mr. Desborne's clerk looked so portentously mysterious as he made this statement that Mr. Vernham did not pursue the subject, but continued to do justice to Miss Polly's choice of ham.

"I am sure Mr. Vernham would like to know the calling you would have preferred, Reggie," suggested Reggie's brother.

"There is no reason why Mr. Vernham should not be told," answered Reginald, with dignity, "but the question is one which could scarcely interest him."

"I feel very curious," declared the visitor, "and if there really be no secret——"

"None in the world, so far as you are concerned. I should not take the mass of mankind into my confidence, but you, of course, are different," and there ensued another pause which Mr. Vernham waited for the information which did not come.

"May I tell?" asked Gus.

"Of course, though there is nothing much to tell."

"Reggie would like to be a detective," said the other.

"A what?" exclaimed Mr. Vernham, really thinking he could not have heard aright.

"A detective," repeated Gus, speaking very distinctly.

"If you remember," observed Mr. Reginald Tripsdale, "I said it would not do myself, though what little talent I possess does lie in that direction. I felt it would not do. No more useful individual than a skilled detective walks this earth. Yet there is a prejudice against him. The way I put the thing in my own mind was this, 'you may be indifferent concerning the world's opinion, but you have no right to pull down your brother who is going to rise high,' so I gave up my fancy."

"You really believe you have the detective gift?" suggested Mr. Vernham, by way of saying something.

"Believe! I know I have. You remember the Chingford murder, which has baffled the police for more than a year, and will baffle them for many a year to come? Well, sir, that affair is no mystery to me. I could lay my hand on the murderer to-night."

"Then why do you not? It was a dreadful affair."

"There is a lady in the case," replied Mr. Tripsdale. "A lady who was very badly treated. Couldn't add to her trouble—pretty creature, too."

"I think you were right in deciding the profession of a detective would not suit you," remarked Mr. Vernham, with a smile.

"Too soft-hearted, eh? Well, perhaps so; at any rate, in this case I could not give up the criminal to justice. It was a mere look, a glance, gave me the clew, which I followed till I held the whole puzzle in my hand, and there it is going to remain."

Philip Vernham's sense of humor was about on a par with that possessed by Mr. Edward Desborne, otherwise Mr. Tripsdale's frowning face, Mr. Tripsdale's

dramatic gestures, and Mr. Tripsdale's heavily impressive manner must have moved him to shouts of laughter. As it was he sat looking in amazement at the amateur Fouché, who, gratified at the impression he had made, continued :

"But even in my own profession this gift will stand me in good stead. I intend to make criminal practice my specialty. I mean to carve my name on the topmost branch of the legal tree, just as I mean Gussy to write his high in art, and, of course, this power of tracking guilt home to its lair will be an enormous weapon in my hand when I come to cross-examine."

"Of course," agreed Mr. Vernham, overpowered.

"But why should I weary you, sir, with these fantastic visions? Let me give you another cup of tea. Do you like the scent of that mignonette, or is it too strong for you?"

"Not at all; I wondered what the delightful perfume was."

"Gus says we ought rather to have a jar of rose-leaves instead, to match the furniture, but we have no rose-leaves and I don't know where to get any; besides, as Polly very truly remarks, if we begin having everything to match the furniture, we shall never stop till we are ruined. *Pot pourri* is very troublesome to make, she hears, and expensive, too."

"When I have time I will make some myself," observed Augustus.

"I think you might rest well content with the mignonette," ventured Mr. Vernham.

"Particularly as Polly bought it," added Mr. Tripsdale.

"If I am any judge of faces," thought the visitor, "that is the very reason he does not appreciate the perfume."

"Three years ago a friend sent me a young myrtle," he observed aloud. "It has grown very much, but to my regret never yet bloomed; perhaps it may this season."

"I can tell you why it does not flower," said the elder Tripsdale, eagerly.

"Indeed! I should like greatly to know."

"The slip was not taken when the myrtle was in bloom, which it ought to have been—at least so I am told," was the explanation, which elicited from Reginald the pleased remark:

"Knows a little of everything, doesn't he, sir?"

"It seems so," answered the visitor, and really when, an hour later, he rose to take his leave, he felt convinced Augustus Tripsdale knew more than a little of many things.

"He has such a lot of time for thinking," observed his brother. "He is not like me, in a whirl all day long; but I try to keep my eyes and ears open to pick up all I can, and then in the evenings we sit by the window in the twilight and talk. Lord! what talks we do have."

"You must find them very pleasant. You have a delightfully quiet home here and a happy one, I am sure."

"Yes," returned Reginald. "I often think that when Gus is President of the Royal Academy and I am Solicitor-General, we will look back to the old home and the days we spent in it with regret."

"Time brings gain and time brings pain," quoted Augustus, sententiously; "we can't have one without the other."

"If not intruding, will you allow me to walk a few yards with you, Mr. Vernham?" said Reginald Tripsdale—"just as far as the City Road. I would take it as a kindness, and can perhaps show you a short cut."

They went down the staircase together, and out into the quiet evening. Some children were still playing in the square, but most of them had gone home, and silence was settling down upon the place.

"I am going to ask you a favor, sir," began Mr. Vernham's companion, without any needless beating about the bush. "It is this. If you ever have occa-

sion to come again to our office will you speak to me just as you would to Mr. Puckle? I mean as though this evening had not been, and should Mr. Desborne chance to mention my name or ask whether you knew me—I don't say he will, but such a thing might happen—would you mind telling him the service you did my brother, but not that Gus is as he is.”

“Mr. Desborne does not know, then?”

“And I don't want him to know. He is so kind he would not rest until he got him under some specialist, or maybe into some hospital, and we don't care to be befriended and meddled with. Personally, I think philanthropists are the greatest nuisances on the face of the earth. They are so anxious to do good they can't let people alone, and they can't understand that people as a rule don't care for good to be done them—all they desire is to be let alone.”

“And is Mr. Desborne a philanthropist?”

“He is, sir, and a deuce of a one, if I may use such an expression. I don't mind, though, who he exercises his benevolence on so long as he keeps his hands off Gus. I know we are neither great nor grand, but we have our feelings for all that. We don't want to be patronized, and we are not going to be patronized either. Now this is your shortest way home. Good-night, sir, and thank you. Good-night.”

CHAPTER IX.

HOPE DEFERRED.

It was a broiling day in the early part of August. Pea-picking had long been over in the market farm that stretched so far into West Middlesex and Surrey, into Kent and Essex, and along the winding Lea, Isaac Walton's own river, to wooded Hertfordshire; and the men and women who had gathered hundreds of thousands of bushels for that gigantic householder, London, and afterward stripped the gooseberry and currant bushes, and were even then filling great baskets with "black Jacks," egg, Orleans, and greengage plums, and in favorable localities, even early William pears, than which, if it be not a libel to say so, no fruit that grows can taste less like fruit.

The last bank holiday also of the year, the very last universal holiday till Christmas which, as it has always been, is not accounted a holiday at all, was past and gone, the "small fruit" had been gathered, brought, into market, bought, sold again, eaten, and preserved, and Aileen Fermoy sat once more in her shop alone knitting stockings.

If she were reviewing her season's earnings she had no reason to feel dissatisfied. The debt to Mr. Plashet had long been repaid, and the five pounds lent by Mr. Desborne also. Mr. Philip had taken the amount to the firm and returned her the firm's acknowledgment. So far all was well, yet judging from the expression of her face, things were not well with Aileen Fermoy.

Things, on the contrary, were extremely unpleasant. True, trade had been and trade was as good as trade

could be. Each day brought fresh customers, because a pleasant face, nice manners, and honesty cannot fail to draw custom in any business. She was doing, commercially, very well, very well indeed. The Field Prospect Road business bade fair to become a very good business, but of what use is prosperity, especially to a woman lacking that sweetness which, according to the Scriptures, makes even a dry morsel palatable?

She would have been more than content with the driest morsel could she but have eaten it in peace. She did not yearn for wealth or greatness; she was willing to earn her bread in the sweat of her brow, but what she pined for was some quiet place in which to partake of her modest crust.

But the trouble was she knew that never forever could she hope for quiet in a house where her father's widow dwelt—Mrs. Fermoy herself was always “on the go,” as was her many sons, and as also were her grandchildren. For Aileen to ask for rest in that home was as useless as asking for rest on the treadmill or an express train. Imagine a quiet horse who knows his business doomed to run in double harness with a skittish colt off the moors, and some idea may be formed of the life poor Aileen had to lead.

Because, though old enough, Heaven knows, to pace through life soberly, Mrs. Fermoy was, to all intents and purposes, a young colt, and what can possibly be more unsatisfactory than the sight of an elderly matron who should be staid, possessed by the insane idea that she is a good deal younger than any girl?

And the worst of Mrs. Fermoy's delusion was that it proved expensive.

No woman, young or old, can go “junketing” about among her friends unless she have many sixpenny pieces in her pocket; and when pecuniary matters revert, as at some time or other they are sure to do, to “first principles,” it becomes an extremely nice question who is to supply the sixpences.

Aileen had supplied them till she grew tired and heartsick, when the usual troubles ensued.

After a person has unfailingly given sixpences to many people who asked for them, any refusal to continue the supplies is considered as a breach of faith.

It was so considered in this case, but Aileen remained firm. She had made up her mind during Whitsun week to contribute no more than a certain amount to the family exchequer, and she held to her resolve spite of many bitter reproaches and cutting taunts.

Dick, having spent his unjustly acquired five pounds, had returned hungering and thirsting for more. Most unfortunately, he failed to receive the justly due chastisement promised by his elder brother, who, being out of work, and for the time dependent on his mother, was forced to listen when Mrs. Fermoy intervened on her favorite son's behalf, called Tom a brute, begging him to look after his own children, and "daring him" to lay his finger on any of hers.

After this episode Dick was particularly requested to partake of an excellent tea, and did so, willingly making for his own consumption many rounds of toast, which he buttered hot with that liberality people often evince when distributing goods they have not had to pay for; while Aileen maintained a dignified silence, and was reproached by her stepmother because she "could not find a pleasant word to say to the poor fellow who had come back to them at last."

"But who has not brought with him the five pounds he stole," answered the girl.

"Oh! come now, don't let's have any talk of that sort," cried Mrs. Fermoy. "Stole's an ugly word, and after all, the paltry money never went out of the family."

"It went where I do not intend any more to go," said Aileen.

"Why, bless my soul, anybody to hear you talk

might think you had lost a five hundred bank note," retorted Mrs. Fermoy.

"In its way the loss seemed as great to me as five hundred might to another."

"Lord pity you! If you take things to heart that way you won't have much of a life, I'm thinking."

The remark was so true, even while so foolish, Aileen felt it best to hold her peace, and drank her tea in silence, although Dick, seizing a favorable opportunity, derisively put out his tongue to its full length.

Even that delicate attention did not affect her as it might once have done. "Those who laugh last laugh best," and there was something in the smile which rewarded his grimace that made Dick feel uneasy. In truth Aileen had decided there was to be no more pilfering. A woman whose husband could not work by reason of an accident, and who had many small children to support, lived close by, and to her care, evening after evening, week after week, Timothy Fermoy's daughter carried her money to be kept safely.

The amazing honesty of the poor thing justified her trust. There were times when that half-starved and anxious creature did not know where or how to get a loaf, yet to the extremest farthing she returned Aileen's deposit, and received with pathetic thankfulness the sixpence or shilling the girl gave her for the care.

After a time, when compelled to absent herself, Aileen paid this woman to take charge of the shop, which arrangement proved a grievous offence to Mrs. Fermoy, but a great gain to Aileen, who speedily found out how many sixpences had been taking wings to themselves and fleeing away, perhaps, after that hoarded five pounds so unscrupulously annexed by Dick.

For these reasons, and also because the season had been a peculiarly favorable one, Aileen, as she sat and knitted, might have been justified in considering herself a fortunate girl, but she did not do so.

After all, money troubles are not the worst people have to contend with ; on the contrary, they are a sort of outside trouble, bad enough, certainly, but infinitely small when compared with the sorrow against which no door can be shut, no heart closed.

Now, Aileen had the latter to fight against, and the inequality of the struggle was beginning to tell. On that August day she did not sing, as was the case some months previously.

Things were worse in August than they had been at Whitsuntide. Dick was unbearable.

He had developed a pleasant trick of clasping the girl round her neck, and then pounding her with his knee till she often felt faint, which amusement he alternated by kneading her as he might dough on a feather pillow.

He never actually struck her, and the whole performance might have been what he called only a "bit of fun," but as it always occurred after Aileen had refused to give him money, the case looked suspicious.

But there was more the matter than Mrs. Fermoy's untidy, irregular home, than Dick's pretty tempers, and Tom's lack of work. What chanced to be really wrong with Aileen was that hope deferred, which we all know, makes the heart sick.

A great hope had at Whitsuntide sprung into life, and though she tried not to think about or depend on it, quite unconsciously she had thought till time first obscured its rays and then blotted them out altogether.

No one can hope without expecting, and this girl had gone on expecting hour after hour and day after day, till she felt nothing good could come of the matter, that she must put the notion of eternal help out of her life if she were to do any good in it.

"I'll try and save a little and follow Mr. Plashet's advice," she said, half aloud, as she laid one stocking aside to begin another.

Now, Mr. Plashet's advice had been given in this

way : "I'd have thought a sensible, hard-working girl like you would have tried to better herself before now."

"And, indeed, sir, there's nothing I would like more than to better myself if I only knew how."

"Well, a round in Battersea and the Borough Market may be all very good as a start, but you ought by this time to be working up a business in some of the new suburbs and dealing with a man down the road."

"Down what road, sir?" asked Aileen, humbly, anxious for information.

"Down any road, to be sure. Wherever there is a road out of London, market gardeners send their carts along it. You could buy just as cheap or cheaper from there as here, and then your goods would be left at your own door instead of your having to fetch them. I'd think that over if I were you."

Aileen did think it over and even mooted the notion to Mr. Philip, who failed to look on the project with enthusiasm.

"You see, sir," went on the girl, a little chilled, but not wholly disheartened, "if any money came out of that advertisement——" and she paused as if expecting an answer.

"It is difficult to tell, but I think money may come out of it."

"And how much do you think, sir?"

"I really cannot conjecture."

"Do you suppose it would be more than twenty, sir? The gentleman offered to let me have twenty."

"Yes, I should imagine more than twenty."

"If it mounted to fifty——" tentatively.

"If it did, what then?"

"I'd try to get out of this. I'd find a shop, a regular shop, I mean, somewhere. Mr. Plashet says I might let the upper part for enough to clear the rent, and I'd take Jim, and allow Mrs. Fermoy what I am giving her now. I know I could make out a living, and oh! I

should think I was in heaven if only I could be let to earn my bread in peace."

Mr. Philip looked at her gravely.

"You must not be disappointed, Aileen, if Mr. Desborne finds he has made a mistake."

"Indeed, sir, I am expecting nothing."

"I think you are wise, and I think you would do well to put this idea of shop also out of your mind, else it may unsettle you a little."

That it had unsettled her a good deal there could be no doubt. The days passed on, the weeks, the months, and it was somehow a different Aileen who sat among her stores counting the number of her stitches.

The heat was oppressive, spite of the open field beyond, the whole neighborhood seemed pervaded with what has been aptly called that "poor peoply smell" which the sun or damp, muggy weather draws out of the very ground in those parts of London where the rank and file of its inhabitants dwell.

An indescribable smell, one which may be felt! Outside the shed two of Mr. Thomas Connollan's children were sitting on the curb with their feet in the gutter.

Parental fondness or foolishness had purchased for the boy a toy trumpet, from which he was producing ear-splitting sounds for the delectation of Field Prospect Road.

The girl, who was a little younger, naturally wished to produce similar sounds, and earnestly entreated, "Let I blow the trumpet, do, Bertie."

"Na-h, ye won't blow the trumpet, ye won't blow the trumpet," returned the other, emphasizing his words by digging his elbow into his sister's ribs. "Hoo-to-to," and he blew a blast of derision on the abominable instrument, above which rose wails of distress from Minnie, caused partly by pain—for Bertie's elbows were sharp—and partly by disappointment.

Aileen rose and went out. Mrs. Fermoy's grandchildren were brats no human being, except a prejudiced parent, could have really liked, but Aileen had a

soft heart, and the poor little girl looked so miserable and neglected—with great tears running down her dirty face—that Timothy Fermoy's daughter was moved to deep compassion.

"Why, Minnie dear, what is the matter?" she asked, picking up the child, who was indeed almost too grimy to touch.

"He won't let I blow the trumpet," sobbed Minnie.

"Why can't you let your sister have it?" said Aileen, looking down at Bertie.

"Na—h; she sha'n't blow the trumpet! she sha'n't blow the trumpet!" drawled this scion of the Connollan house. "It's mi—em," and he blew a blast and pulled a face which made Aileen long to shake him. Clearly Dick's mantle had fallen on his nephew. "Never mind, Minnie," remarked Aileen, "we will find something nicer for little girls to play at than blowing trumpets. What have you been doing, child?" she added suddenly; "you are as black as if you had been up the chimney."

"I did that," said Master Bertie, proudly, suspending his musical performance in order to make the statement; "there was a sweep's brush standing outside Mrs. Dingland's, and I ran away with it and painted Minnie's frock; didn't I, Minnie?"

"Yes," answered the child.

"Very well, Bertie, we'll hear what your father has to say about such doings."

"Who cares for him," retorted Bertie, "or for you either. Hoo-to-toot-too," and the wretched trumpet gasped out its last breath in one husky scream of defiance.

"There, now you have broken it," said the young imp. "I'll go and tell my fader, I will;" and full of this intention he ran into the family mansion where the eldest Mr. Connollan was, spite of the heat, sitting in the kitchen before a huge fire placidly smoking his pipe, while a pewter measure stood on the table beside him.

On second thoughts, Bertie said nothing about the

trumpet then. Instead, he clambered up the paternal knee and exclaimed, "Give me a drop, fader, do give me a drop!"

"That's my fine fellow," returned the proud parent; "you aren't afraid of honest ale; take a pull, lad; you know the trick, that's the way. Why, I'm blowed if you have left as much as would drown a fly. You'll soon be able to toss off your half-pint like a man; that'll be a rare bit to tell Aunt Ally."

Which seemed so delightful; a joke so likely to amuse and gratify Aileen, that the burley father laughed till tears came down into his eyes and Master Bertie echoed the laugh with a shrill "he-he-he."

There ensued a pause—a pause of some minutes—during which the father was considering that before long his precious son would be old enough to fetch a pot from The Bedford Arms, close at hand, and wishing that desirable time had arrived; while the son, who, ere so very many years had elapsed, might be "depended on to give good support to the nearest and many other 'pubs,'" thought in a childish, cunning way whether he had not better fasten the guilt of breaking that toy trumpet on nasty Aunt Ally at once, when Aileen herself entered—Aileen—yet another.

It was the same Tom Connollan who sat smoking; it was the same wretched little Bertie astride his father's knee, who sat there thinking in his childish way, but it was quite a changed Aunt Ally who, pushing open the kitchen door, walked straight to the fire and thrust a sheet of paper deep among the glowing coals.

"Hillo!" cried Mr. Thomas Connollan, "a love-letter. Ha, ha, Miss Ally."

"Are there no letters but love-letters?" asked the girl, bending a perfectly colorless face over the blaze.

"There may be, I don't know. I never had many letters in my life, and I've always done my courting by word of mouth."

"If ever I have a love letter," said Aileen, "I do not think I shall put it in the fire."

"When you have one, girl, I hope it will be the right sort," answered Mr. Connollan, in the character of a stern moralist. "Ally, could you lend me a shilling?" he added, as a natural afterthought. "I'll pay you back honestly whenever I get a job."

"I will *give* you a shilling," answered Aileen, with an emphasis which implied she had often before lent money and failed to get it back.

"You don't seem to give it over willingly," said Mr. Connollan, with a sneer.

Aileen did not reply, and was about to leave the kitchen when her steps were arrested with the words:

"I say, Ally?"

"Well, what is it now?" she asked.

"He has not jilted you, has he?"

"Who?"

"The chap as wrote that letter?"

"No."

"It looks mighty like it," soliloquized Mrs. Fermoy's first born when he found himself alone. "Perhaps that is what has given her such a pain in her temper lately. I must ask Jim about this," he decided, while Aileen went back to her shop in time to surprise Master Bertie, who had craftily taken advantage of the dialogue between his elders to slip out and fill his small cap and pocket with the fruit left momentarily at his mercy.

"He's been 'tealing your pears, Aunt Ally," declared Minnie, who was herself in the act of descending from a raid in the window.

"Na—h, I warn't stealing yer pai—rs. I warn't stealing yer pai—ars," shouted Bertie, in a wild fury, "but her pinny is full of them."

"I have only tooked one or two, and they was rotten," whimpered the precocious young monkey, taking good care, however, not to display the contents of her apron.

"You are very bad children, both of you," observed Aileen, with conviction the while she personally con-

ducted them into the street. "Run away this minute, and don't let me see you here again or I shall have something to say you won't like. Be off now," and she released the small culprits, who, much relieved, wended their way to a place they wot of where such unholy gains as stolen pears, "grabbed" pieces of loaf-sugar, and snatched cakes could be devoured in peace, the while "Aunt Ally" returned to her accustomed seat and reread by the light of memory the letter she had burnt.

It was from Philip Vernham, and ran almost as follows :

"DEAR AILEEN : Mr. Desborne would like to see you to-morrow, as near noon as may be convenient. He assures me money will be coming to you. Remembering what you said six weeks back, I ventured to ask him whether the amount would reach to fifty pounds, and he answered, 'Certainly ; to considerably more.'

Yours faithfully,

"PHILIP VERNHAM."

Here was something to think about ; something which had taken the color out of Aileen's cheeks, set her pulse fluttering, and her heart throbbing. More than fifty ! How much more, she wondered ; perhaps a hundred ; perhaps two ; and then that jade, Fancy, who always delights in carrying those who give heed to her far aloft, in order generally to drop them flat on the earth again, whispered "five hundred."

"No, no," argued Aileen's common-sense, "such a thing could not be ; how could my father's old uncle ever gather such a fortune together?"

"But," persisted Fancy, jogging the girl's memory, "your father always told you how 'close and near' he was, and how 'beyond clever' and 'good at a bargain.' He might have put past five hundred pounds. Why, even your father who was not 'close or near' died, leaving stock, good-will, carts, horses, and furniture, worth two hundred ; you hear that said many a time."

"Yes, indeed," sighed Aileen, "and it went like snow off a ditch."

"So you see," said Fancy, persuasively, "it is quite probably five hundred pounds is coming to you or *more*."

"No," answered Aileen to the tempter, "it won't be five hundred or more, but it may stretch to a hundred, and if it should"—then she paused, and after a minute mentally added, "I must take good care of it, and I will;" which utterance might be regarded as a solemn promise sworn to on the New Testament, for indeed Aileen, though naturally generous, had found the necessity of keeping money, which, unless kept well in hand, has a nasty habit of flying away and never coming back again.

"I must not sit here idle," thought the girl, rising suddenly, "or I shall lose my head. How it is going round! Will to-morrow never come that I may know?"

The morrow came, a day as fine, as bright, and as warm as that on which Mr. Philip's letter changed the aspect of life for Aileen.

"You'll be sure to look after the shop, Mrs. Stengrove," she said, earnestly, as though no legacy had been looming in the near future, and then, modestly attired in her Sunday's best, she went tremblingly forth to learn her fate.

When she reached Messrs. Desborne's office it was Mr. Puckle who answered her timid inquiry with:

"Mr. Desborne is out, madam, but if you will be kind enough to walk upstairs Mr. Thomas Desborne is in and can attend to you. This way, please," and he went with her up that flight of stairs Mr. Tripsdale had descended in such wrath.

CHAPTER X.

A GREAT FORTUNE.

With a strange sense that she was not Aileen Fermoy at all, but a greatly superior person, the girl walked into that office which was, so to speak, Messrs. Desborne's "Board-room."

Her unaccustomed feet sank deep into the Turkey carpet that covered the floor. Her eyes beheld with awe the huge, many-drawered table at which generation after generation of Desbornes had sat. She reverently surveyed the high mahogany "nest" containing tin boxes labelled with the names of honored clients, and never asked herself how it was possible such crude ways of business could still obtain, ere an inner door opening she found herself confronted by a small spare man who, after saying, with formal courtesy, "I am glad to see you, Miss Fermoy," placed a chair for her on one side of the great table, and seating himself in one opposite, took up his parable as follows :

"My nephew, whom you saw on the occasion of your previous visit, intended to be here to receive you. He must have been detained at a Board meeting he had to attend, however, and under the circumstances it is my privilege to communicate very good news to you."

He paused, after the manner of a man accustomed to take snuff, and Aileen, thinking some answer was expected, said, "Thank you, sir."

"My nephew, I know, meant to say he feared you must have imagined we were very dilatory, but the fact is another claimant unexpectedly appeared in America. His pretensions, however, are satisfactorily

disposed of, and it is therefore now, as I said, my privilege to inform you that you are the undoubted heiress to a very large fortune."

"Yes, sir." Then, as Mr. Desborne did not immediately proceed, she asked, diffidently, "To how much?"

"To how much should you suppose?" he replied.

Aileen's heart beat wildly. She knew from Mr. Thomas Desborne's manner the amount must exceed fifty pounds by a good deal, so she almost gasped out, marvelling at her own temerity:

"Is it—is it, sir—two hundred?"

The junior partner looked at her with a sort of pitying wonder.

"When law costs have been paid—perhaps you may have heard lawyers, unfortunately, expect to be paid—there will be left for you, as nearly as possible, *one hundred and thirty thousand pounds.*"

"One hundred and thirty pounds, sir," said Aileen, very thankful, yet, it must be confessed, somewhat disappointed.

"Thousand," supplemented Mr. Thomas Desborne.

"What is that, sir?"

"Do you mean yearly income?"

"I don't know what yearly income means, sir."

"A yearly income," explained Mr. Thomas Desborne, with that compassionate forbearance a right-minded man always evinces toward a woman's ignorance, "means the amount, whether gained by labor or derived from the investment of capital, which a person has a reasonable right to depend upon receiving in the course of a twelvemonth. Your money, being remarkably well invested, will at the present time insure you something over six thousand a year, or, roughly speaking, more than a hundred pounds a week."

"But that can't be, sir; it's impossible," said Aileen, not meaning, of course, that the gentleman was telling an untruth, but only that he must be utterly mistaken.

"Impossible or not, it is true," was the answer.

"That I am to have a hundred pounds each week?"

"Precisely."

For a moment the girl looked at him with dilated eyes; then her lips parted, her gaze faltered, her head dropped, and to Mr. Desborne's dismay, she burst into a passion of tears.

Here was a dilemma. In the whole course of his professional experience he had never found himself in so awkward a position.

He had, of course, seen women cry, but then he knew what they were crying about, and he could not form the faintest idea why this girl had covered her face with her hands and was weeping convulsively.

"What have I said? What have I done?" he exclaimed in despair, looking helplessly first at Aileen and then at the carafe with a vague intention of offering her some water. "This is really dreadful. I do wish Edward were here."

As if in obedience to some incantation, at that instant the door opened and the head of the firm, looking pleasant and handsome as ever, came into the room with a light, buoyant step and a smile, which vanished at the sight of his uncle's horrified face and the sound of Aileen's unrestrained grief.

"I never was so glad to see you before," said Mr. Thomas Desborne.

"Why, what is wrong? What has happened? Good heavens, what is the matter?"

"I cannot imagine, I am completely in the dark. When I told Miss Fermoy the amount of her fortune she broke down completely and has remained in the state you see her ever since."

The elder man spoke as though Aileen had been weeping for a twelvemonth, and the younger naturally asked, "Ever since how long has she been like that?"

"I don't know, it seems a long time. Perhaps I was too abrupt, perhaps I ought to have led up to the subject more gradually, but who could have expected such an outbreak? Can't you say something to her?"

If his uncle did not know what to do, Mr. Edward Desborne proved equal to the occasion.

"My dear girl," he began, laying a persuasive hand on her shoulder, "do try to compose yourself. At least tell us what is troubling you so much? We are all friends here, and will help you if we can."

It was strange to see the instantaneous effect his voice had upon her. Making a desperate effort to check her sobs, Aileen lifted her eyes, swimming in tears, red and swollen with weeping, to his sympathetic face.

"Oh! sir," she began, "I'm——" but there she broke down again, and, burying her face in her handkerchief, cried hysterically.

"She will be better presently," said Mr. Edward Desborne. "Never mind us, Miss Fermoy; let your grief, whatever its cause may be, have its way. We will leave her alone for a little," he added in a low tone to his uncle, pointing to the inner room, which happened at that moment to be unoccupied, but where Mr. Knevitt was generally in evidence devoting all the powers of a very shrewd mind to legal and personal matters.

"What do you suppose is the meaning of all this?" asked Mr. Thomas Desborne.

"I can't tell, but such a large windfall might well knock anyone over."

"But it need not have made her cry," said the elder man in an aggrieved tone. "I never saw a woman cry in such a way before, and she did not say a word, but just began—and went on," he added as an after-thought.

Mr. Edward Desborne laughed, and turned the subject by speaking of the meeting he had attended and some other matters, which whiled away, perhaps, fifteen minutes, when a modest tapping at the door attracted his attention.

It was Aileen, who, pale and shaken, but collected, stood on the threshold.

"I am ashamed of myself, sir," she began; "I can't think how it was I came to behave so foolishly. I am very sorry and I hope you will excuse my taking the liberty of knocking, but I thought I would say I was going."

"You must not go yet, if you please. There are many things we ought to speak to you about. If you remain quiet for a little while you will be able to talk. You shall have this office all to yourself."

"Would you not rather go upstairs, Miss Fermoy," suggested Mr. Thomas Desborne. "I think you will find my room more comfortable than our office. There are books you might like to look at."

"An excellent thought," chimed in the younger man. "My uncle's sanctum is delightfully quiet, and you really must not go with those traces of tears still on your cheeks."

"But I am giving so much trouble," said the girl, humbly.

"We hope you will give us much more trouble," remarked the head of the firm, with a smile. "Shall I take Miss Fermoy upstairs, uncle?"

"No, I will do the honor of my city house," answered the old lawyer, who felt puzzled how to adapt his formal code of courtesy to the needs of this strange client. "This is my home," he added, after they had ascended the next flight, ushering her into a room a little smaller and rather lower in the ceiling than that they had just left, "and now you can remain quite undisturbed for hours if you like. This is a comfortable chair, and when you feel inclined to read, there is, as you see, enough light literature to amuse you for an hour."

"But, sir——"

"I must leave you now," went on Mr. Thomas Desborne, unheeding this protest, "but shall see you in an hour. Meantime, if you want anything, just touch that bell and my housekeeper will answer it," and he was gone before Aileen could utter another word.

With a strange sense of peace the girl sank back in the easy-chair the lawyer had wheeled round for her.

She was in sore need of peace and rest, and that seemed to her the very quietest room in the whole world ; not a sound of the city traffic broke its silence. Double windows deadened all noise. Facing north, its atmosphere was cool and pleasant, especially as a ventilator deftly introduced into the wide old-fashioned chimney performed its intended work to admiration.

With tired eyes she looked around. There were bookcases which reminded her of the Rev. Mr. Vernham's study in the days gone by.

Poor Aileen ! There was nothing gracious or good or tender her eyes saw but recalled that far-away time when the Vernhams supplied all her soul lacked and heart desired.

That had been the best time of her life when she trotted on little errands to the "Curacy" and afterward waited hand and foot on the "dear lady," Mr. Philip's mother ; when Mr. Philip's cheery "Good-morning, Aileen," sounded pleasant in her ears, and Mrs. Vernham's "Good-night, my dear child, and God bless you," was sweet as the verse of a psalm.

Then it was she acquired that soft refinement of speech and manner which seemed strange in one so situated ; then it was that by daily association with a gentlewoman—the most patient and loving of Christians—she began to discriminate, and learned to know a gentlewoman when she saw her, even when poorly clothed and stripped of adventitious surroundings.

And for this reason Mr. Thomas Desborne's bookshelves, though neither so wide nor high as those at the "Curacy," recalled the memory of that gracious past before sickness and death changed Aileen's home for the first time, and again sickness and death obliterated all save the memory of it.

But the girl could not forget, could never forget. Across the weary years of uncongenial work and un-

accustomed hardship tender hands seemed stretched forth to her in loving greeting.

There was a subtle scent in the room, she remembered, but could not recognize, for it is not everyone who is familiarly acquainted with the faint yet pungent odor of Russia leather.

Everything around her, even the stillness and peace of that strange room, so lonely amid thousands of people, so quiet within hearing of the roar of London, seemed like something given back.

Afterward a soothing touch stilled her overwrought nerves, gentle voices sounded in her ears, beautiful visions and pleasant thoughts came to her, for the girl slept.

Quite unawares slumber overtook her and brought visions of a lost paradise on its wings.

When had she known such a sleep!

It was indeed an experience to thank God for most devoutly.

She awoke at last not to a knowledge of where she was, but to a consciousness that someone was moving about the room.

"I hope I have not disturbed you, miss," said that "someone," seeing the girl stir and push back her hair, which movement displaced a neat little bonnet. "Mr. Desborne gave me particular orders not to waken you, and——"

"Have I been to sleep—here?" asked Aileen, horrified.

"You have had a beautiful sleep, miss, and I hope you are all the better for it. Mr. Desborne said as how he thought you might like a cup of tea, so I've kept a kettle boiling all the afternoon and——"

"All the afternoon!" repeated Aileen. "Why, what time is it now?"

"Just upon four o'clock, miss. No, please don't stir, don't ye. I'll fetch the tea and then you'll feel better like knowing what you are doing."

"Just upon four o'clock!" Then she must have been

fast asleep in Mr. Desborne's office for almost that number of hours. How could she have done such a thing? What would that gentleman think of her? And she pressed her cramped hands to cheeks that were painfully flushed and wondered how she could ever make excuses and apologies enough.

For the girl was absolutely humble; in the innermost recesses of her heart there did not lurk one atom of self-esteem, and though Mr. Thomas Desborne had told her she was heiress to great wealth, that fact did not make her think more of Aileen Fermoy or less of the "gentlemen" through whom knowledge of her astounding good fortune had been conveyed.

"I thought, miss," said the housekeeper, reappearing at this moment, "it might refresh you just to bathe your face, so I have taken the liberty of bringing you some water," and spreading a snowy cloth over one of the small tables close at hand, she placed upon it a basin, which she filled from a great wide-mouthed ewer. Could it be for her! Aileen! who had not experienced one single womanly kindness since death's hand fell heavily on her mother, that all this fuss was made? Could it be to Aileen Fermoy, who to provide bread for others had gone from door to door asking those as poor as herself, "Is there anything you want to-day, ma'am?" that this strange, unaccustomed courtesy was shown? Yes, it could be, and was; but, to her credit be it spoken, not then, or ever, did the girl say to herself, "It is only because I am rich; they would not have been civil except for the money." Could she have thought or said these things she would not have been the Aileen who, on that hot August afternoon, plunged her face into a basin of fair water that indeed seemed to her the sweetest water in which woman ever laved.

"Thank you—thank you; you are so kind," she said.

The housekeeper smiled. She did not understand the position of this young person at all, but it was

enough for her that Mr. Thomas Desborne had wished every civility to be shown, even to the extent of that cup of tea for which a kettle had been kept in readiness for hours.

That tea was quite different from the strange concoction Mrs. Fermoy called by the same name, and as the girl drank it eagerly, she thought how different everything was from what things had been when, earlier in the day, she tried to eat her breakfast and could not.

Just as she finished a slice of thin bread and butter Mr. Edward Desborne came in.

"Better?" he asked. "Oh, you look better. Now, do you feel strong enough to discuss affairs, or would you rather leave matters over for a few days?"

Very truthfully Aileen answered she would like to hear what he wished to say then and there, and accordingly, without further preamble, he repeated what his uncle had before mentioned. "The money is safely invested," he added, "and we think you would do well to leave it where it is."

"That must be as you think fit, sir, of course," she replied.

"And about yourself. As I have gathered, your home is not a comfortable one. Will you think what you would like to do in the future, and tell us if we can help you in any way?"

She did not answer him immediately; she did not say she would think, because she was thinking deeply then.

"If this money is really coming to me, sir——" she began at last.

"Coming! It has come, it is yours——"

"I meant, if it is not a dream, sir, from which I must waken soon, I should not care to go on as I am. Though there is no creature in the world belonging to me to care whether I am well-to-do or starving," and her voice shook a little, "making a bad use of this fortune, or spending it wisely, my father and mother would have cared, and I'd be glad to try and do what

they would consider right—that is, if they could speak to me now, which they can't."

"I understand; it is a most right and natural feeling."

"When the other gentleman told me such a mountain of money had come to me, I thought my heart would break to remember there was nobody left to go home and tell such news to, nobody to be glad, nobody I could talk to, and give to, and make plans with. It was like having a feast spread with not a soul to sit down and eat but myself. That was what made me so foolish, and I hope you will forgive me."

"Ah! my child, you are not the only person who has experienced the same feeling," answered Mr. Desborne. "There was a man once who after having lost parents, wife, children, won honors which made him the envy of his fellows. When congratulated he only said, 'Too late, there is no one left to care!' But life was behind that man, Miss Fermoy; life is before you to make a great and happy thing of in the future."

"Yes, I feel that in a sort of way, which is why I'd be thankful if I could see what would be best for me to do; what would be right, I mean."

"My wife is below; will you come down and speak to her? I am sure this is just a juncture at which her advice and opinion would be invaluable to you. I can answer for her that she will be delighted to help you in any way. I have been telling her about you, and she is deeply interested."

Aileen hesitated and hung back, the color coming and going in her cheeks, her pretty hair tossed a little about her forehead, her eyes soft with the deep, tender look of one who has been gazing at a beautiful past through mists of sorrow.

"Do come," he urged; "my wife is the very person to put us all right;" but still the girl paused, reluctant to be so bold.

"You must not look on her as a stranger," he went on; "we are all your friends here, and a little sensible

advice now may save a world of trouble hereafter." The words were not much, but the way in which he spoke them proved irresistible. His cheery manner, his frank, pleasant voice, broke down the girl's scruples, and saying,

"Very well, sir, as you think it is right," she went with him into the large office where she had been told of her good fortune, and saw a lady who seemed to her the greatest lady in the land. She was not beautiful but handsome, with a sort of statuesque stateliness which impressed every one who saw her. Patriotic was written on her. As Aileen said afterward, "She is like a queen," and certainly no queen who ever lived could have thought more of herself and less of others than the Honorable Mrs. Desborne.

She was standing by the table and turned as they entered.

"This is Miss Fermoy, Emily, of whom I was speaking just now," explained her husband, and even at the dread moment it appeared strange to Aileen that even he should venture to address such a vision by her Christian name.

"Oh, indeed," said Mrs. Desborne, with a stately inclination of her head.

"And I have brought her to you for the benefit of a little counsel, which I know you will give."

"If in my power I shall be happy, of course. What is it she wishes to consult me about?"

"Tell my wife exactly your difficulty; don't be nervous; explain to her what you would like."

"Pray do," added Mrs. Desborne. "When I know the advice you stand in need of I can give it so much better."

"Then, if you please, ma'am," said Aileen, half frightened by her own temerity, and rushing on as though in terror of breaking down midway, "I'd like to learn how to be a lady——"

"Yes?" said Mrs. Desborne, with an enigmatical smile.

CHAPTER XI.

MISS SIMPSON.

WITH the quick instinct of her class Aileen read that smile aright and knew she had made a mistake.

"I don't mean a lady like you, ma'am ; I know I never could be that. There are not many who could, even if they were well-born and well-bred, but just a plain sort of one who would not be making mistakes, and saying and doing wrong things ladies would never think of. I would try to give as little trouble and learn as fast as I could, if any person was so kind as to put me in the right way."

"Yes," said Mrs. Desborne again, but this time differently.

"In a common fashion I am not so bad a scholar," went on the girl, eagerly. "My father was always anxious I should get learning, and Mrs. Vernham took a great deal of pains to help me with my lessons. I can write pretty well and cipher ; and read almost any word in a book, but I want more than that to know how to speak, and what to speak, and the way to speak it."

Words could not express the utter contempt with which Mrs. Desborne heard this list of Aileen's accomplishments, but she was not offended, and said "Yes," for the third time with a sort of compassionate toleration.

"I am convinced you would be a very apt pupil," remarked Mr. Desborne, kindly.

"Indeed I would try hard, sir, to get on as fast as I could."

"I have no doubt of that," said Mrs. Desborne, "but I fear you fail to realize the difficulties lying before you. At your age it is not an easy matter to unlearn the habits of years."

If anything could have accentuated the great truth contained in these words, that accent was given by Mrs. Desborne's tone, by Mrs. Desborne's manner.

Had she been a judge passing sentence of death on all Aileen's aspirations she could not more pitilessly have conveyed her opinion that all efforts to become even a "plain sort of lady" were futile, and might as well be abandoned at once.

"But if I tried very hard, ma'am," ventured the girl, daunted but not quite crushed.

"You would succeed, I know," said Mr. Desborne, not because he knew it in the least, but because it hurt him to see her look so disappointed.

"You do not quite understand, Edward," said his wife, with a little asperity; "even if it were possible to discover a school where such rudiments as Miss Fermoy requires to learn are included in the regular course—and I confess I never heard of such a school—she would find her position so painful as to be unendurable."

"I should like to go to school," remarked Aileen.

"You see," observed Mrs. Desborne, turning to her husband, with an air of calm superiority.

"No, what I meant was, ma'am, that perhaps some lady, not very well off, would teach me what I want to know. If I could not learn, I should not be much worse off than I am."

"No," said Mrs. Desborne, doubtfully.

"I wonder whether an arrangement of that sort would suit Mrs. Fletcher," observed Mr. Desborne.

"I do not know; you could ask, however," returned his wife, in a manner which implied her opinion that Mrs. Fletcher's social standing was not much higher than the estimation in which she held Aileen.

There ensued a pause, during the continuance of which no one spoke, and no one seemed to have anything to suggest.

Mrs. Desborne's rich dress swept the floor, and the room was filled by the scent of some delicate perfume. Spite of the rebuff she had received Aileen's heart was filled with admiration, and she kept darting little glances of awe and wonder at the lady Mr. Desborne was so happy as to call wife.

For all her averted eyes Mrs. Desborne caught many of these glances, and felt gratified by Aileen's undisguised homage and admiration. It seemed such a pity the girl had fallen into such a fortune! How much more fitting it would have been for fortune to shower some of her favors into Mrs. Desborne's lap! But alas! that could never be.

The Harlingfords' (her family) talents lay in the direction of spending; certainly not of saving, and some one must save if money is to be accumulated.

Suddenly a brilliant idea dispersed the gloom of Mr. Desborne's reflections, and lighted up his face like a burst of sunshine.

"Did you not tell me some time ago, my dear, that Miss Simpson said she would once again have to take a situation?"

"Yes; the foolish old thing invested her money in something which was to double her income, with the result that she has now lost nearly everything."

"Then Miss Simpson is the very person for us."

"I do not think this is a thing which would suit her at all."

"Don't you? I really fancy it might. She is such a dear lady, such a true gentlewoman. Yes, if Miss Simpson be still disengaged the difficulty is solved. I will write to her at once."

"It might be better that I should write, if you really believe she ought to be written to."

"Which I certainly do," he said, looking happy as a schoolboy who has been given a half-holiday.

"If she entertains the idea she will require very high terms."

"Well, money is no object, is it, Miss Fermoy?"

"I suppose not, sir, but I can't get used to feeling I have any."

"That state of mind will soon pass away. When will you write, Emily?"

"If the thing has to be done we may as well get it over at once," answered Mrs. Desborne in a tone of cold disapproval. "I really cannot think it is a charge Miss Simpson would care to undertake."

"Well, we can only put it to her, and she can only refuse. We might arrange a meeting here. What day would suit you, Miss Fermoy, to come into the City again?"

"Any day, sir."

"Any day is no day," he answered, with a smile. "Please name one. Would Saturday or Monday be convenient?"

"Monday, sir, would do very well."

"Then, Emily, ask Miss Simpson if she could come here on Monday about three o'clock."

"Shall I name a salary?"

"Better not; that can be settled afterward. You might say, however, she will find pecuniary arrangements satisfactory."

Mrs. Desborne sat down to write her letter, unwillingly, it is true, yet with a feeling that if the character of the good Samaritan must be put on the stage it was better she should play it. The "old creature" would be very grateful, and she had always found Miss Simpson most useful.

"May I go now, sir?" asked Aileen, in a low voice, so as not to disturb the letter-writer. "It is getting late, and it is a long way to Battersea."

"I beg your pardon. I ought not to have detained you; everything can wait till Monday. You are certain you would rather not take any money now?"

"Quite certain, sir."

"I will see you down-stairs," said Mr. Desborne, holding the door open for her to pass out.

Aileen looked at Mrs. Desborne, not knowing whether to address that lady or not.

Just then Mrs. Desborne raised her eyes, and the girl took courage to speak.

"Good-afternoon, ma'am," she said.

In answer Mrs. Desborne inclined her head after the manner of one receiving homage, and in another minute Aileen, having declined Mr. Desborne's offer to send for a cab, was walking toward Old Swan Pier like one in a dream.

She did not feel at all less dazed when she left the boat at Battersea and bent her steps in the direction of a place she called home for want of a more suitable word.

"If ever I get any of that money," thought Aileen, as she lay through the night trembling like one in a ague, "I will go away. I must go away. I cannot bear this any longer. I will go away, no matter whether I get the money or not."

It was indeed a dreadful house from which the girl went out on the Monday following to keep her appointment in Cloak Lane. She had been to market in the morning and returned to find Tom, who was laid up with the injuries received on crab-supper night, still bemoaning himself in bed with a bottle full of doctor's stuff on a table by his side for company.

As usual the children were disporting and quarrelling on the curb; as usual Mrs. Fermoy was gossiping; and also, as usual, the thermometer of her temper rose to blood heat when she beheld her step-daughter going forth "dressed up like a lady to take your pleasure, as if you were one."

"I am going out on business," was the answer.

"Oh, indeed. It would seem as if business away from Battersea has much increased of late."

"It has," replied Aileen, walking off without another word.

Anyone who looked more unlike a girl to whom had come news of a fortune than Aileen, as she stepped on board the steamboat, it would be difficult to conceive. Rather with her pale cheeks and anxious eyes she resembled a person who sees a heap of fairy gold change into withered leaves. She could not believe, she felt sure there must be some mistake. Either she had dreamed she had been told she was an heiress, or the Messrs. Desborne were mistaken and would tell her so that very day.

In a vague, desponding way she thought, as the vessel glided on, of the pennies she had squandered in going up and down the river, led by that will-o'-the-wisp advertisement; of the hours she had wasted; of the hopes in which she had permitted herself to indulge; of the waking dreams from which loud voices and angry words had brought her back to the realities of a struggling existence, unillumined by love, uncheered by kindness.

Aileen felt very sorry, not exactly for herself perhaps, but for the foolish girl who had let imagination run away with her. Indeed she felt so sorry while recalling the illusions of that golden summer which seemed to her now like the incidents in some pretty, sad story-book. She was only roused from her reverie by the bumping of the vessel against Old Swan Pier and a general exodus across the gangway.

"By your leave, miss," said a boatman who was manœuvring a great rope close by where Aileen sat.

"I beg your pardon," she answered, perceiving she was in the way, and then she too followed the crowd ashore and bent her steps up Swan Lane into Thames Street.

In the after-days, still all to come, she trod those same stones with an even sadder heart, but that was the last time she ever wended her way through the City feeling utterly poor and desolate. For Shawn Fermoy's wealth was fact, and the fortune to which Timothy Fermoy's daughter had succeeded no phantom.

Her stocks and shares had not been bought with goblin gold, but in hard coin of the realm, negotiable by the "Old Lady" of Threadneedle Street.

On that occasion it fell out quite accidentally that Mr. Knevitt was in the outer office when Messrs. Desborne's new client entered.

From Mr. Puckle he had received a circumstantial report of Aileen's dress and appearance on the occasion of her first visit, and with that deeply impressed on his mind it was natural perhaps even so astute an individual as the Managing Clerk should fail to recognize in a girl dressed like thousands of other working-girls, only a little more quietly, the "costeress" who so startled the proprietors of Cloak Lane at Whitsuntide.

Mr. Knevitt was lounging on the hearth, leaning back against the mantelpiece, awaiting Mr. Tripsdale's return from an errand on which he had sent him, and reluctantly moved a step forward in order to answer Aileen's modest

"Is Mr. Desborne in?"

"He is engaged," was the curt answer.

The girl paused and hesitated. Could this be the beginning of the end? Then she remembered how she had been rebuffed more than three months previously, and her courage revived.

"If you please," she began in her pretty way, not adding "sir," however. Somehow she did not feel inclined to do such honor to Mr. Knevitt.

"It is not of the slightest use," he replied, brusquely, "Mr. Desborne is particularly engaged and must not be disturbed. You can leave any message with me."

It was all very like her former experience, with a difference so like that Aileen could scarcely forbear smiling.

"But Mr. Desborne told me to come back to-day about three o'clock," she said, speaking quickly in order to prevent another interruption.

Mr. Knevitt this time altogether removed his shoul-

ders from contact with the chimney-piece, and assuming a more business like attitude asked to be "favored with her name."

"Fermoy," answered the girl, on hearing which magic word a great change was wrought, as if by enchantment.

"I must beg to apologize," said Mr. Knevitt in some confusion; "but I did not know—I thought," he added, dexterously, "it was an older lady Mr. Desborne expected. Had you been kind enough to mention your name at first no mistake would have occurred. I am very sorry. Perhaps you will walk into the office and take a seat while I inform Mr. Desborne of your arrival."

Aileen accepted the chair he placed for her, and looked round the room where her first interview had taken place in much better spirits. She was not deficient in worldly wisdom, and knew very well the sudden alteration in Mr. Knevitt's manner must have been produced by a belief that Aileen Fermoy was a girl worth being civil to.

Not Aileen Fermoy herself, she thoroughly understood; but Timothy Fermoy's daughter, Shawn Fermoy's heiress. And for this reason she went on to argue there must be some truth in the story about her wonderful fortune. Everybody could not be mistaken, certainly not that determined-looking, off-hand-spoken clerk.

Just as she arrived at this conclusion she heard someone running quickly downstairs, and next moment Mr. Desborne opened the door.

"Ah! Miss Fermoy," he exclaimed, "I am glad you have come. Miss Simpson is upstairs, and I think everything is right. If you put on your prettiest manners, and speak to her in your nicest way, I am sure everything will be right. She is the dearest creature, but at first she may strike you as a little formal. You must not mind that, however."

Aileen's heart sank within her. To be told even

laughingly that it was necessary to put on her prettiest manners, and speak in her nicest way did not sound at all promising, but yet the first sight of Miss Simpson rather tended to dispel her fears. She was a lady, not of uncertain age, but of an age perfectly apparent to the most casual observer. She must have been a pretty young woman; indeed she was a pretty old one, with her brown hair plentifully mixed with gray, braided smoothly on her forehead, and that delicate pink and white complexion which is now so rarely to be seen. She had truthful, clear, kindly, dark-blue eyes, and her face wore an expression in which shrewdness and simplicity were curiously mingled. For the rest she was of middle height, well dressed, and evidently a gentlewoman from the crown of her head to the hem of her garment.

"Allow me to introduce Miss Fermoy to you, Miss Simpson," Mr. Desborne said, a little nervously.

"How are you, Miss Fermoy?" added Mr. Thomas Desborne, greeting the shrinking girl with hearty kindness; "this is Miss Simpson, whom to know is to esteem."

Miss Simpson bent her head in acknowledgment of the introduction and compliment. As she did so, at one glance she took in the girl's whole appearance, which apparently proved satisfactory, for she put out her hand, and observing, "I hope we shall be friends," won Aileen's heart instantly.

"Indeed, ma'am, I'd be very grateful," she answered in the soft, low voice rough work and rude associations had not been able to make coarse.

Then there ensued a pause, during which no one seemed exactly to know what to say—a pause that might have proved awkward had Mr. Thomas Desborne not come again to the rescue.

"You had better have a quiet talk together," he remarked, addressing Miss Simpson. "You will come to an understanding much sooner without our help. Good-by for the present. I am so glad to have seen

you again. For the sake of all parties concerned," he went on significantly, "I hope my nephew will be able to tell me an entirely satisfactory arrangement has been come to. Edward, I should like a word with you before I go out. Good-afternoon, Miss Fermoy," and having made his old-fashioned farewells the junior partner left the office, followed by the head of the firm.

CHAPTER XII.

THE PARTNERS.

"You heard the objection Miss Simpson made to undertaking this charge," began Mr. Thomas Desborne when he and his nephew were seated in the lower room, Mr. Knevitt still keeping solitary watch and ward in the clerks' office.

"Yes, but it is not insuperable. After all, the whole affair cannot but be regarded as a mere matter of money, of which, as Miss Fermoy has plenty, and poor Miss Simpson practically none, there ought not to prove much difficulty in arranging details so as to suit them both. It is really a splendid chance for our old friend, and her companionship would be of the greatest advantage to our new client."

"Has it ever occurred to you, Ned, in any arrangement which is completed there are others besides Misses Simpson and Fermoy whose prosperity might be taken into account?"

"No, certainly not. Whose?" Mr. Edward Desborne asked this question curiously. It was evident he had not the faintest idea what his uncle really meant, though there was a certain uneasiness in his manner which indicated a doubt as to whether something unpleasant might not be underlying the suggestion.

Mr. Thomas Desborne did not instantly reply. He sat for a few moments with his head bent, tapping the table softly with the tips of his fingers.

"Whose prosperity?" repeated Mr. Edward Desborne, a little impatiently.

"Ours," answered the elder man, lifting his head

and looking straight into eyes that wavered and shrank a little under his searching gaze. "Ned, I hate going over all the old ground, but I cannot help myself. Our prosperity ought to be taken into account. The interests of Desborne & Son should for once be considered. Suppose you try to remember it is no sin for charity to begin at home, though I admit charity ought not to end there."

"Why, what have I done now?" inquired his nephew. "What have I failed to do? No man ever worked harder over any troublesome business than I to bring this Fermoy complication to a satisfactory conclusion."

"No man can work harder or better than you, Ned, when you choose. I only wish you would devote as much time and energy to other cases as you have done to this Fermoy affair."

"I fancied it was in something connected with the Fermoy affair you thought I had failed."

"No, but I think you were going to fail."

"How? in what way?"

"In letting it slip out of your fingers."

"I do not understand what you mean. Pray speak more plainly."

"I am going to do so. You can't deny that for years our income has been decreasing."

"Many incomes have been decreasing; but let us say, in order to simplify matters, that ours is the only one. In such case, what then?"

"Why, then it might be prudent to face facts; to ask why it has decreased, and to take measures to prevent any further diminution in the future."

"We have often mentioned the causes which you suppose have operated against our success," said the head of the firm, coldly.

"If we are to maintain even our present position I must mention again the causes which I *know* have reduced one of the finest legal businesses in the city to the level of a fourth-rate one," was the reply.

Mr. Desborne made no comments ; he had none to make ; facts are facts, let them be as unpleasant as they will, and if his uncle were determined to review them it was hopeless to try to prevent his doing so. For this reason he only moved his position a little and waited with an outward semblance of patience which ill-concealed the annoyance he felt.

"The first mistake we made," began Mr. Thomas Desborne, speaking not for self and nephew, but for many a Desborne dead and gone, snugly tucked up in vaults under old city churches, or, more recently, buried with considerable pomp and a good deal of expense in Abney Park and Highgate Cemeteries, "was in starting such a ridiculous theory as that the eldest son of the eldest son, no matter how young, foolish, or inexperienced, was the only fit person to represent the firm. Older men, wiser men, more capable men might be his prime ministers, his generals, his advisers, but were never permitted to rule with the head, and this merely because the founder of our business chanced to be a man in a thousand, astute, clever, incorruptible—a worthy descendant of an old race."

"My dear uncle, pardon me for a moment, but is it necessary to go over all this again? I quite agree with you that the whole arrangement was a mistake from the very first. It is a mistake now. Let us, as I have often before suggested, change places. Take the whole conduct of the business. I will be junior partner. Tell me what you wish done, and I will try to do it."

"Will you, indeed, Ned?" asked his uncle, sadly. "If so, it does not matter by what name you are called or what your real standing in the firm chances to be. Were I the head of the Desbornes, and you my son, I could not have your interests more at heart, or sacrifice my own pleasure and comfort more than is the case. I have not, like others of the family, taken my money, my time, my energies, such talents as God has seen fit to give me, out of the business in order to found or join an opposition firm. If from the first the Desbornes

had worked with, not against, each other ; if those of the family who possessed special abilities had been assigned posts as chiefs of different departments, what might we not have been now ? Why, the first firm of lawyers in the kingdom, instead of a decaying 'house.' ”

He paused, but no answer came. What could his nephew say ? What could anyone say who, recalling the past, contemplated the present.

The Desbornes had not resembled the typical bundle of sticks ; rather, one by one, the younger members had gone out alone into the world, with the result that where any success had been compassed the old name was swallowed up among those of them more adaptable, though not more honorable men. For from the first the Desbornes had prided themselves not merely upon their honesty, but their honor. Their traditions were founded upon those of that good time when a city merchant was a man who stood upon the world *sans peur et sans reproche*. Their businesses, their professions were as dear and valuable to them as empires are to kings. Merchants first, they stood high among those who helped to make London city the power it was and is, and when one of the family, the only one destined to convey the name down to modern times, chose for his career law instead of commerce, he took with him to court no less a probity than distinguished his relations or charge.

Small wonder. Thomas Desborne felt proud of the race from which he sprang.

In the Desborne annals there was to be found no record of traitor, profligate, or spendthrift.

Loyal and true might have been the family motto, so well did they act up to its spirit. Loyal and true were the men who sat facing each other on that August afternoon ; but one of them had a flaw of which no Desborne in the former time could have been accused. He was weak. His armor was not thrice plated, like that of his ancestor, the soldier

citizen, who donned it for the sake of God, king, and country.

"But it is of little use talking of what has been," resumed the elder man, at length. "All we can do, all I desire to do, is to strive to keep the little which is left to us."

"That, surely we ought to be able to manage," said his nephew, brightening up at once. An optimist by nature, he could never endure to hear unpleasant things mentioned. When out of sight they were, with him, out of mind; when hidden away they were, to all intents and purposes, non-existent. "As I gathered, you intended a few minutes ago to mention something I had neglected or overlooked in connection with Miss Fermoy's matter. What is it, uncle? Do not be afraid of annoying me. I am a careless fellow, I know."

"You are only careless, Ned, as regards your—or, rather, our—interests. When you undertake another man's business you carry it through; you have carried this through better than I could have done myself, and if we manage matters, as it seems to me we may, Miss Fermoy is certain to turn out a valuable client."

"I am sure of that; she will always be wanting our help in some way."

"She will always be wanting the help of someone," amended his uncle; "the question is whether that help shall be given by us or another."

"I fail quite to comprehend——"

"I will explain. We are now close to where the roads part. Shall Miss Fermoy continue to travel with us or shall we allow her to drift away, and so lose her business and her money?"

"What makes you ask such a question? Of course she will stay with us; we can't afford to lose the management of her affairs."

"Precisely what I think; but consider, Ned, how many clients have already left us we could so ill afford to lose."

"Is that my fault?"

"I am afraid so. I see men come here every day who want subscriptions, or your name, or your time, or your assistance in some direction; but what I do *not* see is that they bring or send any profitable business to us. On the other hand, I do notice that when any profitable business is attached to charitable projects, other firms reap the advantage. Men praise you, Ned, but it is possible to pay too high for praise."

"I never did anything for the sake of praise," said Mr. Desborne, indignantly. "Uncle, do me justice. In anything I have tried to do for my fellow-creatures no thought of praise or profit has influenced me. With no consent of mine is my name connected with any good work. It is enough for me to see the work is done, to know the poor have been helped, the hungry fed, the sorrowful comforted."

"I believe you," answered Mr. Thomas Desborne; "but the result is as disastrous as though you had sought to be known as a philanthropist. While good works are going on, the poor helped, the hungry fed, the sorrowful comforted, we are being ruined. People say, and say rightly, that a man cannot do two things well. It is impossible for him to cure all the ills flesh is heir to and attend to his clients at one and the same time. City folks are cautious folks, and though they like you, they prefer to take their business to a lawyer who has time to devote to it, and not to one whose name appears more frequently in the reports of charitable societies and in the columns of fashionable papers than in matters connected with the law courts and his own profession."

Edward Desborne flushed scarlet. "You hit very hard," he said.

"If I saw a man about to fall over a precipice I should not wait to put on gloves before clutching him."

"And do you think I am falling over a precipice?"

"I think it behooves you to look where you are going."

They sat for a while without speaking a word. Then Edward Desborne remarked:

"I knew you did not mean to vex me, uncle, but it would be idle to deny your accusation holds a cruel sting. Let that pass, however. This unhappy conversation had its origin in something connected with the Fermoy legacy; tell me where I am going wrong in that affair, and I will endeavor to go right. God knows I have striven to do my best for the girl, but as you put matters my best is very bad indeed."

"Your best is as good as good can be, Ned, and if I have wounded you by speaking plainly, have I not wounded myself also? Are you not as dear to me as a son? Have I a thought or wish into which you do not enter? I want to see the old firm resuming the position it once held, I want to hear Desborne & Son spoken of as Desborne & Son were spoken of ever in your grandfather's time, as it might have been now if——"

"If I had been a different man," finished the head of the firm, with bitter emphasis.

"That is not what I was going to say," replied his uncle. "All I will add now, however, is this—for the sake of your boy, of your wife, of yourself, and for my sake also, consider whether there is not far too much truth in the opinion I have expressed, harshly, if you choose to think so."

"There generally is some truth in any opinion, provided it be disagreeable enough," answered Mr. Desborne, with a forced smile.

"It was not your better self which spoke then, Ned," returned his uncle.

"It was not, it was not," acknowledged the other, eagerly. "Forgive my petulance, but you did hit so hard. I will think over what you said. Is there ever anything you say to which I fail to give respectful consideration, but I can't talk more about that. Tell

me what you have in your mind about Miss Fermoy, because the root of this discussion is to be found somewhere in connection with that matter."

"Yes, because I do not want you to act as the Good Samaritan there to our disadvantage. Why, benefiting her, it is surely not impossible to benefit ourselves. This is a critical moment in our acquaintance with the girl, let us make the most of it."

"I am quite willing. What do you think ought to be done?"

"You heard Miss Simpson say that she had no fitting place in which to receive a pupil of any sort, more especially so exceptional a pupil as she supposed Miss Fermoy would be."

"I did, and suggested, as you may remember, that she should hire apartments suitable for the purpose."

"But Miss Simpson did not seem to take kindly to the idea."

"No; she inclined to rent a house, and I think I can understand why. A house, however, can surely be found. It may take a little time to find one certainly, still——"

"There is a house; there are two houses ready to your hand," interrupted Mr. Thomas Desborne.

"Where?"

"One, belonging to Edward Desborne, in York Terrace, and one, belonging likewise to Edward Desborne, called Ashwater. Edward Desborne cannot live in two houses at once, therefore, when he is at Ashwater, Miss Simpson and her charge might well occupy his town residence, and when he returned to London Miss Simpson and Miss Fermoy could run down to Teddington and take possession, for the winter, of Ashwater, usually left to the tender and expensive mercies of a caretaker."

Edward Desborne heard this programme with surprise, not to say dismay.

"I scarcely fancy that is an arrangement which Miss

Simpson would care for," he said, after a momentary pause.

"Then I differ from you ; it is one I imagine she would like very much. At all events, you can but mention what I have proposed. If my suggestion fails to recommend itself to her, of course there is an end of the matter."

"And if she approved, I am quite certain my wife would not," added Mr. Desborne, with conviction.

"Why?"

"It is difficult to explain, but I am satisfied she would object."

"If the idea be properly put before her, I cannot see why she should. It is not as though anyone were proposing that Miss Fermoy should reside with her ; quite the contrary. By the plan I indicate Miss Simpson and her pupil will simply take the place of a caretaker. They will have the advantage of living in good, well-furnished houses, for which, if you like, you can charge a fair rent, and you will have the satisfaction of knowing you are making matters extremely easy for a client who is, I feel sure, a very good girl, and who will, there can be little doubt, prove a grateful one."

The head of the firm sat silent for a short time. That his thoughts were not pleasant was evident from the expression of his face ; nevertheless, at length he said :

"There is a good deal in your notion ; it did not recommend itself to me at first, but—yes—there is much in its favor."

"Then you will place it in as good a light as possible before Miss Simpson?"

Mr. Edward Desborne hesitated.

"Do you not think I ought first to speak to my wife?"

"Oh ! dear, no ; whatever is done ought to be done this afternoon. If matters are arranged comfortably I will tell Mrs. Desborne, should you wish me to do so."

"No, I should not wish that; I will explain everything to her myself."

"Very well, then, I depend upon you, and—Ned—you are not vexed with me now, are you?"

"No, only with myself. What a fool I have been!"

"Were I to say that, how angry you would be."

"It is true, nevertheless," and the speaker walked out of the office and upstairs as if determined not to give himself time to change his mind.

"Well, am I too soon?" he asked Miss Simpson, with his pleasant smile, which took in Aileen as well.

"Not at all; we have finished our talk. I think I know Miss Fermoy's wishes."

"And you really are going to set up house together?" he said, turning to his fortunate client.

"So Miss Simpson says," answered the girl, as though she had no say at all in the matter.

"When I can find a suitable residence," added Miss Simpson by way of rider.

"Do you know what my uncle suggests?" said Mr. Desborne in the assured tone of one who felt certain whatever his uncle suggested would be listened to with respectful attention.

"No; pray tell me."

"That you should live at York Terrace and Ashwater alternately; that is, when we are in town you might reside at Ashwater, and when we are at Ashwater you might return to town."

"Oh! Mr. Desborne, do you really mean what you say?"

"The idea is not disagreeable, then?"

"Disagreeable! delightful, the very thing; the plan is perfect. Who but Mr. Thomas Desborne would have thought of it?"

"I should not, at all events," returned the head of the firm with frank truthfulness. "You will like York Terrace I know, and if you find Ashwater too dull, why we can make some different arrangement."

"Dear Ashwater, I shall never feel dull there. I love

it!" exclaimed Miss Simpson, enthusiastically; but you, Miss Fermoy, perhaps such a home might seem too quiet. I did not think of that when I spoke."


"You need not be afraid, ma'am," replied Aileen, tranquilly. Was not "quiet" what her soul and heart and body longed for? Could any place be too quiet for a girl who had lived in such a pandemonium as the double-fronted house in Field Prospect Road?

"It only seems too good to be true," she murmured to herself softly, but Miss Simpson and Mr. Desborne caught the words and exchanged sympathetic glances.

"What do you think of her?" asked the lawyer, as he conducted Miss Simpson to a cab half an hour later, Aileen lagging, in her modest way, behind.

"She has a lovely face," was the answer.

"Which is but the index to a lovely nature," he rejoined with confidence.



CHAPTER XIII.

MISS SIMPSON DOES NOT APPROVE.

There are larger and finer houses around Regent's Park than those in York Terrace, but any prettier it would be hard to find.

One of the smaller residences in that favored spot had been bought by Mr. Desborne's father, who presented it to his son as a wedding gift.

Never were there such people for buying leases as the Desbornes. It is a way some families have—a survival from a period when purchasing a lease was a good thing—a period antecedent to that when leaseholds became a bad investment, and bidding for them could only be accounted a half-hearted compromise between economy and extravagance.

The Desbornes bought leases of their offices and houses, as well as of various tenements, large and small, in many parts of London, which purchases, though very well at the time, when concluded had a nasty knack of growing less valuable year by year and of at last ceasing to be valuable altogether.

Because, though half a century since it was possible to renew an old lease on not disadvantageous terms, things in the metropolis have been moving so fast for twenty years and more that renewals and reasonable prices can no longer be obtained. Nevertheless tradition dies hard, and the Desbornes, though in the main sensible people and thrifty, went on buying leases and entering into covenants just as their ancestors had done in the old days departed, when time was like

eternity, so slow seemed its progress, so few changes did the years bring with them.

Of all their investments the little house in York Terrace, bought by a loving father for his only son, was perhaps the most sensible. The ground rent was low, and the repairs, though a constant drain, did not cost so much annually as they might have amounted to in a mansion replete with all modern conveniences, including an unsound roof, leaky pipes, and an unsafe boiler, with many other advantages of a similar nature.

It was an ideal residence for a man of moderate means and refined tastes, large enough, yet not too large, conveniently planned, accessible from the city, yet close to the West End, within a stone's throw of the Marylebone Road, while overlooking waving trees and an expanse of soft, green turf.

Mr. Edward Desborne loved his London house very much, though for his wife's sake he would have liked a house, if even in a close street, nearer Piccadilly. All Mrs. Desborne's friends lived and had their being on the other side of Oxford Street, and it was perhaps natural she should resent her banishment to such a wild waste as Regent's Park. She did not care for nature, having in her girlhood had far too much of hedgerows and muddy roads, waving cornfields where never a human being was visible save reapers, and trees which shaded neither fine ladies nor eligible gentlemen.

Happily for nature, however, all women are not constituted alike, and who may tell what joy that beautiful park brought to Aileen Fermoy, who could look out over it whenever she pleased, when the morning dew still sparkled in the sun, in the silent noontide, in the evening when twilight fell softly, wrapping the landscape in its mystic mantle, and at night when the moon, rising behind a bank of clouds, sailed slowly over the tree-tops and behind that oasis in the wilderness of bricks and mortar in silvery floods of unreal light.

It was the sweetest introduction imaginable to her new life. Unreal as her fortune seemed, the fair home to which she had been so suddenly translated, a home which no rude voices penetrated, where no wild tempers strove for mastery, where peace reigned supreme, where also, Aileen felt, though she did not know how to express her thought, people might well grow selfish, because there rose no need for self-denial and self-control, where things were, as she often said to herself with an uneasy twinge of conscience, "too easy, far too easy."

Though a month had passed since that day in the city when all things were arranged satisfactorily, when she returned home with the assured conviction her fairy godfather, Shawn Fermoy, had really sent out of his grave a chariot and horses to take her away forever from the buying and selling of green stuff, from the care of providing daily bread for a large family, from the dreadful surroundings of her hard, exhausting life, she had not yet grown accustomed to the change in her fortunes, and she seemed unable to shake off an uncomfortable conviction that in some way she had acted wrongly in severing herself entirely from the Battersea household.

"Yet what could I do, Mr. Philip?" she said, and he answered, "Nothing."

"It would be impossible to have them coming here."

"Quite."

"And they would be none the better if I went back and stayed with them."

"They would not."

Though had she known all about the Fermoy-Connollan establishment, Miss Simpson would, even more emphatically than Mr. Vernham, have indorsed all the girl's observations, Aileen was careful to say nothing of what was in her mind to that lady.

She could not speak about her past life to one ignorant of its details. Now she was away from them it

seemed to her impossible to talk about Tom, and Peter, and Dick, and Mrs. Fermoy, and the two little children, or even Jim the industrious—the boy she had told Mr. Desborne could “hollo” so loud.

It was only to “Mr. Philip” she could talk freely, and she had seen him but once since her hurried exit from Field Prospect Road, which took place after an uncomfortable evening with her stepmother, who said the girl did nothing, gave nothing, felt nothing, that the entire burden of the house fell on her, Mrs. Fermoy’s shoulders, and that she was sick and tired of the whole thing.

“And so am I,” answered Aileen, leaving the kitchen as she spoke.

When alone, however, an uncomfortable conviction came over her that she had not tried to avert this quarrel—that, in fact, she felt rather glad of the pretext the quarrel gave her for a final rupture.

For days she had been waiting for such an excuse. She knew she meant and ought to take advantage of it, but the whole thing seemed terrible to her.

She stood thinking for a minute, then stole downstairs and re-entered the kitchen where Mrs. Fermoy was putting the chairs in their proper places with a series of bangs, which might well have surprised any respectably-constituted article of furniture.

“So you’re back again. What do you want now?”

“I want to say I am sorry for speaking so sharply a while ago.”

“And well you may be. If your poor father—but then he was as determined and self-willed as you are.”

“Ah! please do not talk about him. All I wanted to say is that I am sorry for answering you short. Good-night.”

“It was hardly worth coming down again if so little could ease your mind.”

“Good-night,” repeated Aileen.

“Good-night, though I have never any but a bad one.”

"Will you shake hands with me?"

Just in a strange manner. "Yes, I'll shake hands. No one ever could say of me I was a rancorous woman, or a woman who bore malice. If I had been, people would not be so keen to live with me as they are."

"Good-night," said Aileen for the third time.

"If you are going to bed, go, and don't stand there hindering me any longer."

Next morning, before a single other member of the family was astir, Aileen arose softly, packed up her best attire, which, with a few other effects, she carried then to Mrs. Stengrove's house; then she returned home for the last time, lit a fire, spread the breakfast-cloth, laid everything ready, and waited till Mrs. Fermoy should make her appearance, which, after the lapse of some time, she did, commencing instantly to find fault with every arrangement Aileen had busied herself with.

"There is a letter for you," said the girl.

"Leave it beside the tray, I'll look at it presently. I have no time to be bothered with anything till I've cooked the bacon. Get me some rashers—nice ones, mind."

"You see where I have laid the letter," remarked the girl.

"I see; do you think I am blind? For goodness gracious' sake, don't pester me with your nonsense. Fetch those rashers."

But Aileen never fetched those rashers. Instead, when she left the house, she went to Mrs. Stengrove's, changed her dress, and was over Battersea Bridge and hurrying to Sloane Square before Mrs. Fermoy had raised a hue and cry after her.

No bacon was cooked that morning, but in lieu of the usual appetizing frizzle the family heard shrieked at the top of Mrs. Fermoy's voice, "Ally's gone! Ally's gone! Come down some of you this minute and fetch her back. She's sold the business, too, as if it was hers to sell, and left me only thirty pounds, the

price she paid for it, and the stock and good-will worth sixty now if it is worth a penny."

"It was the only thing I could do, Mr. Desborne," Aileen told that gentleman, "and they can't starve while the thirty pounds last."

"And then," suggested the lawyer.

"I'll give Mrs. Fermoy a weekly allowance."

"Shall we arrange that matter for you?"

"I think not, sir, thank you. I had better manage to send it to her myself."

"Very well; you know what you are about, I suppose."

"Yes, I have lived with my father's widow for many a long year."

A fortnight passed away, however, before Aileen could think of any possible mode in which she might convey knowledge of her liberal intentions to Mrs. Fermoy, together with tangible proof that she intended to carry them out.

Mr. Vernham was taken into confidence, but though he offered to turn money messenger himself that course failed to find favor in Aileen's eyes.

"Mrs. Fermoy would never give you a day's peace, sir, till she got to know where I am, who I am with, and how I get what I give her, and then I'd never know a day's ease or comfort unless I put the Atlantic between me and her. No, it ought to be a stranger, someone who would pay the money and never give her any satisfaction or take any heed of what she says. If you could think of anybody, I'd be very grateful."

Mr. Vernham, not having been accustomed to the study of such an impracticable personage as Mrs. Fermoy, could not immediately bethink him of a stranger, wise, trustworthy, and ready to turn a deaf ear alike to questions and abuse; indeed, he could not think of anyone, capable or not, to whom might be intrusted the delicate task of carrying a weekly revenue to Field Prospect Road.

At last the brilliant idea struck him that Mr. Regi-

nald Tripsdale contained in his so remarkable individuality all the qualities likely to insure success in such a mission, and forthwith he sought that young clerk at a place and hour where he was accustomed to partake of some modest refreshment.

"Will you do me a favor?" inquired Mr. Vernham.

"Will I? won't I? Just say the word, that's all; to the ends of the earth, sir, if needful."

"I shall not ask you to go so far, not out of London, indeed. It is a friend of mine I want you to help. May I bring her to your lodgings to-morrow evening, and then we can talk matters over?"

It is needless to record Mr. Tripsdale's answer. Orders were given when he reached home that the second floor in Bartholomew Square should be swept and garnished in honor of the promised visit; while Philip Vernham wrote to Aileen asking her to meet him at Moorgate Street Station, about six on the following afternoon, because "I have thought of a person likely to answer your purpose, and consider it better he should receive his instructions direct from yourself."

The next day at five o'clock tea Aileen greatly surprised Miss Simpson by declining a second cup on the ground that she was going out.

"Going out where, my dear?" asked Miss Simpson, suavely.

"Into the city."

"Why did you not tell me sooner? Still, it will not take me five minutes to get on my bonnet."

"Thank you, ma'am." Aileen was painfully learning to drop what her instructress called that superfluous little word, but in times of hurry and nervousness reverted to the old habit. "Thank you, ma'am; I must go alone."

"You cannot go alone."

The girl looked amazed as she asked, "Why not?"

"Because it would not be proper."

"Not proper!" repeated Aileen, confounded.

"No, very improper. I could not think of permit-

ting any young person in my charge to go into the city alone."

"But I have been into the city numbers of times alone. The very day I first saw you I went there by myself."

"Your position was different then."

"I was the same, though, except that I could not believe I had any fortune."

"Exactly, but now when everything is changed you must endeavor to conform to the circumstances in which you are placed."

"But I must go into the city."

"May I ask why?"

"Because I have business to attend to."

"At this late hour?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Miss Simpson looked at the girl for a moment, and the girl looked back steadily at her. There was no shifting or shadow of wrong in the expression of those honest eyes, yet the elder woman did not feel satisfied.

"Do you remember," she began, "that when we were alone together in Cloak Lane, I asked you a question, and before you could answer it, however, Mr. Desborne came in and the opportunity for reply was lost?"

"Yes, but I did not understand what you meant. The words were foreign, I thought."

"I inadvertently used a French phrase which I will now translate into English. Have you any 'affair,' any tenderness?" and Miss Simpson blushed.

For a second Aileen looked puzzled, then she said, without any blush at all:

"I suppose you mean, ma'am, have I a young man?"

"Yes, if that is the way you phrase the matter," answered Miss Simpson, shocked, as indeed she was shocked fifty times a day by her pupil's mode of speech.

"I never had one," said the girl. "I never have said more to a man than just pass the time of day, except

in the way of buying and selling. There has always been something else to think about than young men."

"Then you are not going into the city to meet a young man?"

"Indeed I am not. I am going into the city to meet a gentleman, Mr. Philip Vernham."

"*What!*" exclaimed Miss Simpson, appalled.

"I have been in great trouble about my stepmother," went on Aileen, hurriedly, "and Mr. Philip says he has found someone who can do what I want for her, and will take me to see him, and indeed I must be going or I'll be late."

"Stop a moment!" exclaimed Miss Simpson in a faint, troubled voice. "No pupil of mine has ever been compromised, not the faintest breath has ever sullied the reputation of any young lady I have had the happiness to train up in the ways of virtue and decorum, and it would break my heart, yes, it would, if——" at which point the poor lady, overwhelmed with the picture fancy painted, broke down and put her handkerchief to her eyes.

"And do you really think, ma'am," cried Aileen, "I'd be the one to bring discredit on you? No, never be afraid of that. If I can't just at once learn the things you try so hard to teach me, I learnt long ago to behave as a decent girl ought. I kept myself to myself when I was poor, and I am not going to bring shame on anybody now. Don't distress yourself about me. There is not a lady in the land sets more store by her good name than Aileen Fermoy, and if I didn't I would keep straight because you have been so more than kind to me, and Mr. Desborne, too. Don't fret, ma'am, don't," and before Miss Simpson could enter upon a protest the girl had seized her hand and kissed it twice, thrice, then adding, "I can't stop now or Mr. Philip will be wondering what has happened to me," she ran upstairs, slipped on a hat and jacket, and was half way to Portland Road Station before Miss Simpson

could realize that her hitherto docile pupil had proved insubordinate.

Philip Vernham was waiting at Moorgate Street. "You are in good time," he said, greeting Aileen with a different expression from any his face had ever worn previously when addressing Timothy Fermoy's daughter.

"I could not get away as early as I wanted or I'd have been here sooner," she answered with the simple deference of old. "Miss Simpson was against letting me come at all unless she came too ; and if you please, Mr. Philip, is the place where the gentleman you wrote about living far away?"

"Not very far ; just beyond Old Street."

"Might we not call a hansom ; I want to get home soon ; Miss Simpson will be vexed if I am out long."

"We can take a cab, presently, back to York Terrace if you like, but we will walk a little way now, for I want to speak to you, Aileen."

He spoke her name with a strange thrill of feeling ; indeed he was moved to his very soul.

"I did not answer your letter," he went on ; "because, in fact, I could not——"

"There was no need for an answer," she interrupted quickly ; "it is yours any time you like to take it."

"And supposing the impossible," he returned. "Supposing for one moment that I did take it, what should you think of me?"

"Just what I have always thought of you, Mr. Philip."

"And what is that?"

"That there is not your equal in the world."

Mr. Vernham did not reply. What reply, indeed, was it possible for him to make? He had drawn the answer, which was given in the most perfect good faith, on himself by his ill-judged question, and he could no more refute or deprecate it than he could have refuted or deprecated the girl's statement had she chosen to say "I think very little of you."

"It is quite impossible for me to express what I felt when I read your letter," he said instead.

"I wish it had been better written."

"No writing could have better shown the warm, generous heart that prompted your words. My poor, dear girl, did you really think I would take your money?"

"I did not know, sir; I could not tell. I was afraid you would consider I was taking a liberty in being bold enough to ask such a thing, and then again I felt sure you would be too proud to accept anything from anyone like me."

"Like you! Good Heavens!" Philip Vernham's conscience smote him. Was it, then, his pride, on which he feigned himself, struck this unselfish girl's beautiful mind. He could not take her money, yet in what way was he to make her understand how utterly mistaken in her views he considered her to be?

"From you, Aileen, I could accept what it would be impossible for me to receive from anyone else."

"And you would be only taking your right, Mr. Philip, because what could I ever do to prove my gratitude to you and yours?"

"I have never been able to do for you what I should like; but if you fancy I have ever tried to help you I wish you would promise me one thing in return."

"What is that, sir?"

"Never to give any money away without first telling me."

"But that spoils all the pleasure of giving," she answered, after a moment's pause; "and, besides, how could I make such a promise, because help is not of much use unless we can help there and then, and I never liked to talk about what little I did. Many a time in Battersea when I gave a few halfpence to some poor creature trying hard to fight trouble with all the world against her, I thought how thankful I felt not to have to account to anybody for what I spent, and

though you would not be hard, still how could I ask anybody in want to wait till I had time to write to you and get back an answer?"

Philip Vernham laughed; the girl was so serious and the proposition suggested so absurd. "I did not mean any money literally," he said, "only large sums. A person so recklessly liberal as to propose to give away half your fortune—you offered that to me, you know—ought to be restrained in some way from ruining herself."

"If you would only take it all, Mr. Philip, and just give me enough to live on and keep Mrs. Fermoy I'd be thankful."

"Are you weary of wealth already, Aileen?"

"I am, sir; weary of thinking about it, and what I ought to do. Now, you would know what to do. You would be able to spend money as your mother could have done. Somebody would be the better, somebody would be the happier; but as things are, the money is just there doing no good at all."

"Somebody will be the better, somebody will be the happier. Your money will do much good ere long," was the answer. "I am the better and happier for your letter; indeed, I am inclined to think ill of my fellows. I will take it out and read the kind words you wrote, from your very heart, I am sure."

"Indeed I did, and if only I had known how to put them together better; but, oh! sir, don't refuse because of that—you'll take half the money, any way, if not the whole. If you would, I'd go home proud as a queen to-night."

"I cannot, child; you must keep your fortune; it was not left you to fling about here and there and everywhere. Some day you will find a use for all your money, and, meanwhile, I want you to promise not to give any larger sum—£1,000, for example—without telling me. Remember, Aileen, how poor and unhappy you were last Whit-Monday. Believe me, if you do not take care of your wealth, great as it is, it will soon

vanish and leave you poorer than you ever were. Promise me what I ask."

"Very well, sir, I promise, but you won't refuse to take the half of that money?"

"I must."

"Some day, perhaps, you will think better of it," she persisted, wistfully.

"Never."

"If your mother were living, Mr. Philip——"

"She would tell me to be a man, and make money for myself."

"Do you believe she would, sir, really?"

"I know she would."

"Then I won't say anything more about it."

"But I shall never forget, Aileen."

"Forget what, Mr. Philip?"

"That you offered me over sixty thousand pounds in perfect good faith."

"I could not have offered it any other way," she replied.

They had crossed Chiswell Street and got into Bunhill Row by this time, which was all strange ground to Aileen, and she trod it timorously, feeling that every step was taking her further and further away from Moorgate Station.

"We are almost close to the place now," said her companion, reading her thoughts.

"I am glad, because I do not like to make Miss Simpson uneasy. She is so kind and patient; if I were a lady born, she could not take more pains with me than she does."

Mr. Vernham did not speak, but it struck him many ladies born lacked the spirit of a gentlewoman like this girl possessed.

"Is Mrs. Desborne often at York Terrace?" he asked, after a pause.

"No, she is in Dorsetshire visiting some of her relations. When she comes back we shall be going to Teddington. Mr. Thomas Desborne has called twice

to see Miss Simpson ; he is a very pleasant gentleman."

"Yes, I like him greatly," said Philip Vernham. "Is not this a quiet square to be close to such a busy thoroughfare?"

"Does your friend live here?" asked Aileen, as they stopped at the door of the house where Mr. Tripsdale resided.

"Yes, two young fellows, brothers, of whom he is the younger, have made a home here ; one of them draws most beautifully. He is slightly deformed, poor fellow."

"What a pity!" exclaimed Aileen, softly, and they said no more as they went up the staircase, till they reached a landing where a door stood partially open.

Mr. Vernham knocked, but no "Come in" rang out by way of answer. Instead they heard a halting step, and Augustus Tripsdale threw the door wide and welcomed his visitors with a smile that lighted up his whole face.

"I am expecting Reggie every minute," he said, ushering them into the room which had so taken Philip Vernham's fancy. "Would not the lady like to sit near the window? the lookout, we think, is pleasant."

"It is pleasant," answered Aileen for herself, feeling quite at home with the soft-voiced, quiet lad. "And what lovely flowers you have," she added, bending over a stand filled with heliotropes, verbenas, picotees, and delicate ferns. "How do you make them thrive so well here?"

"With care," he answered, at which reply they both laughed and were friends.

At that moment the younger brother entered. "This is Mr. Reginald Tripsdale," said Mr. Vernham by way of introduction, "who, I am sure, will be not merely able but willing to execute the commission you desire to intrust to him."

Augustus Tripsdale, who was looking at his brother,

wondered to see the deep flush which spread over that young man's face as he bowed profoundly.

It was some seconds before he recovered his self-possession, and his voice shook when he answered: "Any commission with which Miss Fermoy honors me shall receive my very best attention."

Aileen had colored also, but as she had a trick of blushing Mr. Vernham did not feel surprised at that, more particularly when she said: "I think I have seen Mr. Tripsdale before."

"On the occasion of your first visit to Cloak Lane," finished Mr. Tripsdale with an almost beseeching glance which the girl understood perfectly.

"Did I tell you," she inquired, turning to Mr. Vernham, "that Mr. Desborne kindly asked if he should pay this money for me and I refused?"

"You did, and I failed to connect the two things till this moment," was the answer. "I do not think, however, that Mr. Desborne's offer need prevent you availing yourself of Mr. Tripsdale's service."

"Which I place at your command entirely in an unofficial capacity, Miss Fermoy," said Mr. Tripsdale, drawing a few steps nearer. "Anything and everything I can do for you will be done not as Messrs. Desborne's clerk, but as a humble and grateful friend, if he permit me to say so, of Mr. Philip Vernham."

Still Aileen hesitated. She had that in her mind concerning Messrs. Desborne's clerk no one in the room save Mr. Reginald Tripsdale and herself wot of.

"You may trust me, Miss Fermoy," he said, in a tone of earnest entreaty.

"You will find no better agent, I am sure," added Philip Vernham, in a low tone.

Aileen's eyes wandered round the room, then she looked at the two brothers, then she looked steadily at Reginald Tripsdale, and made up her mind.

"Very well," she said, "if this young gentleman will be kind enough to do what I want."

Augustus Tripsdale placed a chair for her beside the

window, then moved behind his screen, followed by Philip Vernham.

Reginald Tripsdale stood waiting Aileen's pleasure.

"Thank you," he said, almost under his breath.

"I could talk better if you would sit down," she remarked.

"Thank you," he said again, and drew forward a stool.

It did not take her long to explain exactly what she wanted ; the fact that he knew her position, past and present, rendered her task all the easier ; moreover, he was a youth who comprehended almost with a hint, and he had heard enough about the Messrs. Desborne's strange client to grasp at once where, as he mentally phrased the difficulty, "hidden rocks rendered the channel dangerous."

For a minute or two after she ceased speaking he kept quiet, writing memoranda in his pocketbook.

"I think I have set down all the points," he said at last ; "but perhaps it would be better for me to read them over, then you can judge."

Memo.—"Mrs. Fermoy, Field Prospect Road, Battersea, W. The Bedford to be allowed £260 per annum, to be paid weekly. Rent of house also to be paid. To be told nothing whatever concerning Mr. Shawn Fermoy's money ; to be left in complete ignorance as regards Miss Fermoy's fortune and movements. R. T. to answer no questions which may be put to him, and to ascertain as soon as possible how the young Connollans' inclinations tend, and if there be any way in which they may be benefited and their future welfare secured. R. T. to take receipts from Mrs. Fermoy in acknowledgment of the weekly amounts paid by him and to forward same to Miss Fermoy."

To convey any idea of the gusto with which R. T. read out these notes would be quite impossible. His tone so impressed Aileen that she felt as though she had embarked on a very serious voyage, with Mr. Tripsdale at the wheel.

"Have I omitted any item?" he asked, closing his pocketbook, but keeping one finger in to mark the place.

"No, I think not."

"Does anything further occur to you?"

"Nothing."

"If during the course of the next few days any fresh idea should cross your mind, perhaps you will be so good as to communicate with me."

"Thank you ; I will, indeed, if you tell me the name of the place."

"This is Bartholomew Square, but you had better take one of my brother's business cards. If you just substitute Reginald for Augustus it will be all right."

The business was concluded and Aileen rose to go.

"I am greatly obliged to you, Mr. Tripsdale," she said, with that pretty shyness which had delighted Mr. Desborne.

"And I am very grateful to you, Miss Fermoy," returned the young fellow, looking at her with a sort of mute appeal which she could not help answering with a smile. "I will do my best for you."

"I am sure of that," she replied. "Do you think I could get a cab near here?"

"Of course ; I will fetch one instantly."

"Have you arranged matters to your satisfaction?" asked Mr. Vernham, who, having heard Aileen moving, came forward at this moment. "No, don't go for a cab, please," he added, addressing Mr. Desborne's clerk, "we are sure to see one in Old Street. Good-evening." And he was turning away without any more ceremonious leave-taking when Aileen, who had not herself been so long promoted from the ranks as to have learned to look down on others, gave her hand to the pale lame lad by whom Dame Nature had dealt so scurvily and said "Good-by" with such sweet womanly comprehension of the trouble he must have passed through that his heart went out to her with a

strange yearning that made him tremble as he held her fingers in a nervous grasp.

"I wonder if I shall ever see you again," he said, all in a hurry. It is timid, retiring people who are ever making unconventional and impulsive speeches.

"I do not know, but I hope we shall," she answered, gently, and went downstairs accompanied by Mr. Vernham and Reginald Tripsdale.

Having shaken hands with the one brother she felt she could not do less than go through the same ceremony with the other, whose mode of receiving the civility was, however, less appreciative.

"Good-evening, madam," he said, in a good professional tone of voice; "I hope ere long to inform you of the result of my visit to Battersea. Good-evening, Mr. Vernham." And he went upstairs again with a thoughtful, not to say dignified, expression of countenance.

"Who is that girl, Reggie?" asked his brother.

"That," replied Mr. Reginald Tripsdale, flinging himself into a chair, "is *our heiress*."

"Our what?" inquired Augustus.

"Our heiress—sought for, advertised for, fought for, won—heiress to about six thousand a year."

"Are you serious?"

"Never was more so. Never was so dumfounded as when I saw her here with Mr. Vernham, though I knew he and she had some sort of acquaintance."

Augustus Tripsdale remained silent for a minute or two thinking, or, as his brother put the matter, "turning things over."

"Is it a case?" he said at last.

"What do you mean?"

"Will he marry her?"

"Mr. Vernham? Oh! Lord, no! She's not the sort at all; no money can ever make her his equal."

"It is a pity."

"Why?"

"Because she would make him *such* a wife. I wish she would sit to me."

"Is there any other unlikely thing you feel inclined to wish when you are about it?"

"Yes: that Mr. Vernham would marry her."

"He will when the sky falls, not before. Now, let us have some tea."

While the coachman was driving along Old Street and threading the labyrinth of streets that seem to any but the initiated a mere maddening maze lying between Goswell Road and King's Cross, and Aileen in her uneasiness was thinking every yard a mile, and asking her companion whether it was very late, Mr. Thomas Desborne, having alighted from an omnibus at the Mother Redcap, and walked thence through Gloucester Gate, across Regent's Park, had knocked at the door of his nephew's house, inquired for Miss Simpson, and been ushered into that lady's presence.

Aileen need not have felt so anxious to get back. In the society of such a visitor, Miss Simpson could very well dispense with her presence. Ten years before, Mr. Edward Desborne's former governess had dreamed a fairy tale in which Mr. Thomas Desborne acted the part of an elderly prince, and she that of a middle-aged Cinderella. Her heart was young if her face were not. No one had ever asked her love or wanted her heart, and, therefore, she gave both unasked and unsolicited to the "best and most chivalrous man she ever met" over and over again. She thought he meant to propose to her over and over again; he did not propose, held back, as she believed, by a natural shyness, which, though adding in one way to his attractions, was sometimes productive of inconvenient results. Whatever the reason, he never did ask her, but remained solitary in his city fastness, while she, after Mr. Desborne's death, retired from active service and lived in a poor way, though always careful to keep up appearances, on a little money she had saved, and a little more which the then head of the Desborne firm left her.

She never, however, severed her connection with the

nobility and others, occasionally visiting Lady This and Mrs. Somebody Else, ostensibly as a friend, but really in a half professional capacity, and so she not merely retained her position as "dear Miss Simpson, so useful and thoroughly to be depended upon," but added something yearly to her income and managed to live for weeks and years at a time without having to reduce the trifling balance at her bankers'.

In such a life the years slip away without leaving any traces behind them, and to the simple lady, when she found herself over again with her kind friends, the Desbornes, it seemed that she had but yesterday laid down the old threads of intimacy which she took up again as easily and naturally as a woman picks up her knitting and goes on where she left it off.

This was the third visit in three weeks Mr. Thomas Desborne had paid her, and as she had never before received even one visit from him, she might be excused for imagining there was "something in it."

She had not anticipated such a pleasure, and was glad an unfailing sense of fitness and unremitting attention to *les convenances* had induced her to "bathe her eyes and arrange her cap, and sit quietly down to her work after Aileen's abrupt departure."

When Mr. Thomas Desborne entered the library he found her composed and ladylike as usual, "the very picture of an ideal governess, companion, and friend."

"I ought to apologize for intruding at so late an hour," said Mr. Desborne, "but I felt that I wanted a breath of fresh air, so made York Terrace at once a means and an object."

"I am sure if York Terrace could speak it would say it is always delighted to see you."

"That is a very kind remark, which I appreciate. I like to come here. By the way, I wonder why my nephew does not make this his home during Mrs. Desborne's absence."

"He is so fond of the country," said Miss Simpson,

smoothing out her crewel work and looking at the colors pensively.

"Is he? Since when?"

"Since always, I suppose," answered Miss Simpson.

"I was not aware. It never occurred to me that he was fond of the country."

"Why, then, did he buy Ashwater?"

"Indeed, you may well ask, though you need not wonder. He bought it to please his wife."

"But his wife does not like the country."

"Not in the abstract, perhaps, but she likes it when town goes there for the summer."

"Ah!" said the lady.

"And when all that is settled, do you like the country, Miss Simpson?"

"I like everywhere," she answered, with an engaging smile. "I can make myself happy anywhere."

"But how do you think it will be in the short winter days, in the long winter evenings? Won't you feel very dull and lonely during gloomy November and dark December?"

"I think not; a mind which has resources within itself ought never to feel dull and lonely."

"And what about Miss Fermoy?"

"I cannot answer for Miss Fermoy."

"I see you are alone. Is she out?"

"She is out."

"That is unusual, is it not?"

"Very."

"Would it be indiscreet to ask where she has gone?" inquired the lawyer, struck by the peculiarity of Miss Simpson's tone.

"Certainly not; I am glad for you to do so. She has gone into the city."

"Into the city!" he repeated. "What can she want in the city?"

"She wants," said Miss Simpson, speaking very slowly and impressively, "to meet Mr. Vernham."

Mr. Thomas Desborne did not whistle, but his lips

emitted a sibilant sound as nearly resembling that vulgarity as a respectable solicitor might adventure upon.

"Are you not mistaken?" he asked.

"No; she told me so herself."

"It is very odd."

"And most improper. I wished to accompany her, but she said she must go alone. It is not my fault, Mr. Desborne; I urged and entreated of her to refrain from committing such an act of indecorum. I prayed her not to persist in compromising herself and discrediting me, but all to no purpose. She answered me as usual, sweetly, but stubbornly refused to sacrifice her own will. I never before imagined she had so strong a will, and she is not a child whom one can coerce. She is a grown-up woman, and I do not know what course to take with her."

"Has she been in the habit of going out alone?"

"Never, even for a breath of fresh air in the park. You told me, if you remember, she had been accustomed to a good deal of exercise, and if she had expressed a wish for a short walk I should have attached no consequence to such a desire; I mean at a time when the park is most empty."

"And I really do not think you need attach any importance to this departure. She has known Mr. Vernham all her life."

"But still he is a young man, Mr. Desborne," returned Miss Simpson, as though summing up everything which could be said in a created being's dispraise.

"Yes, he is a young man," admitted the lawyer.

Miss Simpson made no reply. She felt she had gone as far as retiring modesty permitted, and did not deem it fit to outrage propriety by pursuing the conversation further.

"He is a young man," repeated Mr. Desborne, happily ignorant of all that was passing through Miss Simpson's mind, "but a quite exceptional young man

—a young man so exceptional and so unlikely to make an appointment with any girl unless he had some good and sufficient reason for making it that I think there must be more in this matter than meets the eye. She did not by chance say why he had asked her to meet him?"

"I gathered from her disjointed remarks that they were going to see a vague person who had business relations with her stepmother, but of course I took that statement merely for what it was worth."

"You might safely have taken that statement as worth a good deal, my dear lady," replied Mr. Desborne. "The poor girl has had many troubles, which Mr. Vernham knows more about than any of us."

"Indeed! So far as I am concerned, I may say I know nothing about them; Miss Fermoy is very reticent."

"Do you not think many persons are reticent when they have nothing pleasant to talk about?"

"It seems more natural to me that a girl should confide her troubles, if she have any, to a lady friend, and seek for sympathy from one of her own sex."

"Miss Fermoy probably has not yet realized what a friend you could be," said Mr. Desborne, adroitly complimentary.

"Besides," went on Miss Simpson, acknowledging the implied flattery with a gracious inclination of her head, "I should have imagined anyone possessed of such a fortune would have found many pleasant things to talk about."

"She does not speak of her fortune, then?"

"She does not."

"Or build any air-castles, or look forward to a brilliant future?"

"If she encourages any dreams of that kind it is in silence."

"Dear me!" exclaimed Mr. Desborne.

"Till this evening I have had no occasion to find the slightest fault with Miss Fermoy. She has been docile,

diligent, and respectful, but all is reserved—I may, indeed, say close—beyond all my former experience.”

“That is very sad. Let us hope that under the genial influence of your companionship she may become more communicative.”

“It seems to me unlikely,” said Miss Simpson, sadly.

“And as a pupil what is your opinion of her?” asked the lawyer, not unnaturally anxious to change the conversation.

“That she is dull,” answered the lady.

“How you do surprise me. I should have thought she was quick.”

“Not at all, quite the contrary. If you only saw the pains she takes to learn, the efforts she makes to understand, and the poor results of all her pains and endeavors, I am sure you would be sorry for the girl.”

“I am sure I should—indeed I am; but only consider, Miss Simpson, how short a time you have had her in hand.”

“Long enough to judge of her abilities,” said the lady, oracularly. “So far I have not been able to teach her the names of the kings and queens of England down to Elizabeth, and I am greatly afraid she will never learn even her notes.”

Mr. Desborne sat as if struck dumb by this statement, but he really was wondering whether he remembered the names of the kings and queens of England, and if he could tell them off-hand. On the whole he felt rather glad Miss Simpson did not wish to put him through his paces.

At last he thought he would adventure on one question:

“Is not Miss Fermoy rather too old to learn her notes?”

“If she wishes to study music I fail to see how she is to compass her desires unless she just master that slight difficulty,” was Miss Simpson’s ironical reply.

"And does she wish to study music?" Mr. Desborne inquired, innocently.

"I understand she wished to learn everything generally included in a young lady's education."

"Poor soul!" muttered Mr. Desborne.

Miss Simpson did not reply. She was wondering what her visitor meant, and had no wish to commit herself till she could arrive at some understanding of his enigmatical exclamation.

Was it in pity for Miss Fermoy's ignorance or astonishment at the mass of knowledge she must attack and demolish before anyone would call her "finished," that he spoke those two words. Why should he be sorry for the girl? If the fields of learning were broad and long, they are also full of flowers which anyone anxious to be instructed might weave into lovely garlands, and what could be more delightful than to wander across those fair meads, led by the accomplished hand of such a skilful guide as Miss Simpson knew herself to be?

"I agree with you," began the lady at last, when she felt the pause was becoming awkward, "that it must be rather a trial for Miss Fermoy."

"Here she is," interrupted Mr. Desborne, ruthlessly, as a timid knock and ring echoed through the silent house. "I feel very glad she has returned while I am still here. How do you do, Miss Fermoy?" he added, advancing to meet the girl, who, after answering his inquiry, turned to Miss Simpson and said apologetically "I am afraid I have been a long time gone, but I could not get back any sooner, though we made as much haste as we could."

"Why did not Mr. Vernham come in?" asked Mr. Desborne.

"He had to go to the Edgeware Road," answered Aileen, simply. "I did not want him to come back from the city with me, but he said it was all on his way, and indeed Miss Simpson we did not lose a moment."

"I am quite willing to believe that," returned the lady addressed with frigid civility, "but I hope, Miss Fermoy, you will never think it necessary to make such an appointment again."

"I do not suppose such an appointment ever will be necessary again," replied Aileen, with a coldness iced to match. Miss Simpson cast an appealing glance toward Mr. Desborne, who returned it with a meaning smile and a slight gesture which the lady understood to imply he wished to speak to his client in private.

"You will take a little supper, I trust," she said, rising as she spoke and leaving the room on hospitable cares intent, once more exchanging glances with Mr. Desborne as she went.

The moment the door closed behind her the lawyer crossed the room to where Aileen was standing.

"Why could you not trust us to arrange matters about your stepmother?" he asked, kindly.

She lifted her eyes to his and dropped them again, speaking no word.

"Would you rather not tell me?"

"You do not know Mrs. Fermoy," she answered. "She is a good woman in many ways. I do not want to say anything against her, but she is boisterous, and if you wrote to her she would go to your office and make a disturbance, and never rest till she got to know where I am, and when once she did know I might as well give up, for she would never rest till she had me back, or the money at any rate. And it would do her no good, it would go like water. I have seen how it has been with little, and it would be just the same with much. I want her to be comfortable, but I do want to have some peace myself, and not to have any of them making a disturbance at your office. I am sorry to have vexed Miss Simpson, but I could not help going, after Mr. Philip had taken so much trouble for me."

"I will make it all right with Miss Simpson," said Mr. Desborne, "but pardon my asking—believe me the question is not dictated by mere curiosity—whether

you are certain you have found a person qualified to transact this little business better than we could have done."

"I think so, sir, for the reason I told you just now. Mr. Philip says he is to be trusted, and I feel sure he will be able to talk to Mrs. Fermoy as she needs to be talked to, and let nothing out in answer to all her questions."

"Do you intend to make your stepmother a very liberal allowance? Forgive, me once again, if I seem intrusively inquisitive."

"Indeed, you are only too kind, sir. No, I am only going to give her what I think enough—five pounds a week—it is not because I grudge her more, but I am afraid that much even will do them harm rather than good."

"It certainly is a large sum for a woman in her position."

"Not larger than she can spend, and ten times that would not satisfy her if she knew I had it."

"I see."

"And I hope, sir, you don't think I did wrong in going into the city this afternoon."

"No, no, child; I am only vexed to think we cannot take all the trouble off your hands."

"There are some troubles no one can take off our hands," answered Aileen, with that wise shrewdness which seemed to Mr. Desborne so incompatible with stupidity, having delivered herself of which truth she left the room just as Miss Simpson re-entered it.

"Everything is quite clear to me," said Mr. Desborne, "and you need not be at all uneasy about your charge. Will you take my word for the fact that she is a thoroughly good girl, possibly not a clever one, but good?"

"I like her so much I am only too glad to take your word; but you cannot wonder at my feeling somewhat anxious."

"I do not wonder at all. Of course you have had

to deal with young ladies in quite a different rank, and what would have been most unusual and improper had they so conducted themselves strikes you as unusual and improper in this daughter of the people. It does not seem so to her, but still she will fall into your views because she likes you. I am quite persuaded the way to influence Miss Fermoy is through her heart and not her head. A word to the wise suffices, and you are very wise, Miss Simpson."

"I trust I may justify your good opinion," said the lady, coloring with pleasure.

"I am confident you will, and begin by showing Miss Fermoy she has not hopelessly offended you. I promised to win your forgiveness. Prove that I was not too bold."

"Too bold, Mr. Desborne ; you, who are——"

"As a rule, I know I am rather diffident," he finished, seeing Miss Simpson was at a loss how to complete her sentence.

That evening the lawyer made himself, as the lady afterward observed, "truly delightful." He talked, if not of Shakespeare and the musical glasses, of subjects as lofty and refined ; over supper he ranged from gay to grave, from lively to severe, with a charming ease which, if Miss Simpson's heart had not been already won, must have captured it effectually. He spoke of the latest novel and the coming opera, of royalty and the agricultural laborer, of foreign parts and English slums, all with that familiarity which a man who knows a little of everything can affect at a moment's notice.

"It is quite like old times," thought Miss Simpson.

"By the bye," said Mr. Desborne, suddenly, "how do you spend Sunday afternoon?"

"We generally remain in-doors," answered the lady. "We go to Marylebone Church or Trinity or All Souls in the morning, and read quietly after dinner ; for we always dine early, as you are aware, Mr. Desborne."

"The reason I ask is that I thought I might induce you to come into the city and have a cup of tea with me. We could then attend evening service in one of the old churches, and with your permission I should have the pleasure of seeing you home."

"That would be delightful," said Aileen, at whom he looked as he finished his programme.

"Yes, charming—if——" faltered Miss Simpson.

"Now, please do not throw any obstacle in the way," entreated Mr. Desborne, rising. "I shall expect you next Sunday not later than four o'clock, and as much earlier as you care to come. Good-night, Miss Simpson. I always enjoy an evening here. Good-night, Miss Fermoy. I think I shall introduce you first to St. Swithin's Church, and show you before you go in the very stone on which Jack Cade laid his hand and said, 'Now I am King of London.'"

"And who was Jack Cade?" asked the girl.

"Miss Simpson will tell you, or, better still, she will give you a book in which you can read all about him for yourself. Farewell till Sunday."

"That will be nice," exclaimed Aileen, as the door banged behind him.

"Yes," agreed Miss Simpson, with a little shy hesitation. "The only doubt I have is whether I am old enough to go myself and take you to a bachelor's house."

"Oh! I am sure you are," answered Aileen, with disconcerting frankness; then, seeing she had made a mistake, she hastily added, "It is not as if Mr. Desborne were a stranger, you know."

"That makes a difference, of course," agreed Miss Simpson.

"It makes all the difference," declared Aileen, and Miss Simpson believed only because she wished to believe, and allowed herself to be propitiated simply for the reason that she wished to imagine the girl supposed her to be ten or twenty years younger than was actually the case.

CHAPTER XIV.

MR. TRIPSDALE CREATES A SENSATION.

On the Saturday following Aileen's visit to the city Messrs. Desborne's youngest clerk, clad in that light suit which had so roused Mr. Knevitt's ire, took boat from Old Swan Pier to Battersea. He had, as he remarked to his brother, "made a dash for it." A man, even if possessed of Mr. Reginald Tripsdale's activity, cannot hurry to St. Bartholomew's Square, "snatch a mouthful of dinner," "change his clothes," give "just a passing look in the mirror to see that everything is right," and rush back to Thames Street in half a minute. Accordingly the afternoon was well on before he reached Old Swan Pier, and in September the days grow short.

Fortunately, a boat had just arrived, and, getting across the gangway with the first contingent of "up river" passengers, he was able to select a seat where he could assume a languid attitude, and watch the humors of the crowd—never far to seek in such an assemblage.

There was the pretty girl, with a far-off expression in her eyes, who sat looking at Mr. Tripsdale without seeing him, thinking of her dying mother or drunken father or home the brokers' men had taken possession of. There was the widow in deep weeds still mourning for her dead husband, and there was another who had well nigh forgotten she ever married one; there were numbers of working-men returning home with a week's wages in their pockets, and other men who could not get work and were taking home nothing but

sad hearts ; there was the conversational individual, who would have chatted to a deaf mute rather than not chat at all ; and the self-contained man who resented every attempt to make him talk, and answered the most ordinary question with a morose monosyllable ; there was the polite person who begged pardon on the slightest provocation, and the boy who shoved his way through the passengers regardless of their prejudices and ribs ; there were "the toffs" coming from no one knew where, and going to no one but themselves could tell where ; and the buxom lady in a black apron and carrying a huge bundle who told them the "lowest coster in the walk would be ashamed if he could not behave himself better than he did ;" there was the usual musician with a wheezy accordion and a cracked voice—in a word, all sorts, if not all conditions, of men were to be seen on the deck of that steamer, men and women who had so many things to think about interesting "to themselves" that they felt no inclination to think of anything else, and women who saw each day of their lives so many strange sights and odd people that even Mr. Tripsdale's hat and Mr. Tripsdale's summer suit did not excite their curiosity or arouse their admiration in the least. For all the attention anyone paid to his remarkable appearance he might indeed as well have had on his old office coat, shining about the elbows ; nevertheless, a man such as he dressed not merely to awe his fellows, but to please himself, and that he was pleased no one who looked in his face could doubt.

He knew, no matter what those around thought or did not think concerning him, that he was bound on an important mission—that he was about to face a tartar.

With the best intentions Mr. Vernham had sketched such a portrait of Mrs. Fermoy as woke what Mr. Tripsdale mentally called "all the fight" in him.

"When Greek meets Greek," he thought, "there will be the devil to pay," and, fortified with this con-

Victory, he shook the remembrance of his inappreciative fellow passengers like dust off his mind at Battersea Pier, and stepped ashore strong in the might of his strength and his determination to vanquish Mrs. Fermoy and return from the battle triumphant.

Battersea is not the nicest place in the world to saunter through late on a Saturday afternoon, and Mr. Tripsdale, who had never before penetrated into those remote regions lying beyond the Park, could not occasionally avoid pausing to consider the places out of the squalid poverty of which Timothy Fermoy's daughter had jumped into over six thousand a year.

Men who professed to be starving, were walking along one street four abreast lustily singing hymns, a wretched-looking woman in another, with a sickly-looking baby in her arms, was quivering out "Home, Sweet Home." On the doorstep of a house Mr. Tripsdale passed a half-tipsy female in a torn gown and wearing a battered bonnet, who was with many oaths adjuring some one to come out, which invitation the unseen individual wisely declined in a golden silence. Further on three lads were indulging in as much bad language as the irate and intemperate lady, and everywhere foul smells and unpleasant sights and sounds and misery and struggling wretchedness abounded. Even the public-houses, not yet lighted up, looked dull and cheerless. It was the very hour to see a suburb inhabited only by the sons and daughters of toil at its worst, and familiar though Mr. Tripsdale was with the spectacle of wretchedness in Hoxton, illuminated by flaring naphtha, he felt that in Battersea he had reached a lower and less picturesque depth of misery—poverty without scenic effect or dramatic dress or coloring or relief of any sort.

In his heart he believed that his light suit and horsey breast-pin and marvellous hat ought to be a joy to the neighborhood, that in this way he was a small Lord Mayor's Show to the inhabitants, a pleasure even to look at, something unique for the natives to

speculate concerning a person whose like they did not see every day.

It was a harmless delusion which comforted him greatly, the while Battersea, intent on its own affairs, its buying and selling and making its wages go as far as they would, thought nothing about him save that an odd looking young man was passing through its midst, who at intervals inquired his way to Field Prospect Road.

"First turn to your right," answered a policeman at last, adding, "what are you up to now, you young plagues of Egypt?" Which last inquiry was addressed to Bertie and Minnie who, having caught a puppy, had knotted a rope round its neck, and were dragging the unfortunate animal along the pavement. "Loose the poor brute."

With a shrill laugh they dropped the cord and ran after Mr. Tripsdale, mocking his walk and his gait as they followed.

"Oh! crikey, what a masher!" exclaimed Bertie, swinging his small person from side to side in humble imitation of the perfect original.

"Oh! cikey, wot a mashy!" echoed Minnie, thrusting forward one shoulder and then the other, and almost tumbling in her efforts to emulate the antics played by the "strange man's legs."

Quite unexpectedly the "strange man" turned and confronted them.

"Which is Mrs. Fermoy's house?" he asked, in what seemed to the guilty pair a terrible voice.

For an instant they stood as if petrified in an exaggeration of one of Mr. Tripsdale's own pet attitudes, then uttering a derisive yell of defiance Bertie took to his heels and fled into the next street, followed by Minnie.

Unaware that they construed his simple question into a threat, Mr. Desborne's clerk stood looking after the pair in amazement. "What a neighborhood" he thought, and he resumed his way.

Just then an ill-looking lad, neither boy nor man, came along the pavement whistling.

"Would you kindly tell me where Mrs. Fermoy lives," asked Mr. Tripsdale, endeavoring to subdue the dwellers in this unfamiliar land by the power of civility.

For answer, the young cub, who was none other than reprobate Dick, thrusting a dirty thumb over his shoulder indicated a double-fronted house, the door of which stood open.

"Boors, all boors," decided Mr. Tripsdale, advancing to the dwelling wherein Aileen had passed many an unhappy year.

The Saturday cleaning was evidently but just finished, the oilcloth in the hall was not yet dry, and the white semicircle, which in all such neighborhoods adorns the pavement outside the front door and is a sort of hall-mark of respectability, since mean and poor and dirty indeed must be the house which fails once a week at all events to hang out this sign, had not arrived at its proper color.

Like many another inactive housewife, Mrs. Fermoy, taking an unfortunate pride in her "quickness," and holding her more methodical sister in deep disdain, was in the habit of deferring her cleaning operations to the eleventh hour, and then sweeping and shaking and banging and scrubbing with a wild energy and terrible determination well calculated to strike dismay into less vigorous minds.

That afternoon she had indeed wrought wonders. Mats and bits of carpet had been tossed out of window and from the back door recklessly, and, as though things of no account, her sons had fled before the dust raised by her broom and the rapid advance of her scrubbing brush and pail as a routed army before the face of a victorious foe, and when Mr. Tripsdale sounded a peremptory double rap at the door she was in the act of "sluicing her face and arms" at the kitchen sink after her arduous battle with the powers of dirt.

In a neighborhood where everyone knocks double knocks, such a fanfare does not attract as much attention as it might in Belgravia; and consequently it was

not till Mr. Tripsdale had repeated his summons with greater energy than he previously exerted that Mrs. Fermoy came into the hall, wiping her brow and hands with a blue checked apron which she had snatched up en route.

It was growing a little dusk in the hall by this time, and she could only see a vague figure standing on the threshold as she advanced from the kitchen, and asked

“What is it?”

No lady likes being disturbed at her toilet, and she put the question sharply.

“Mrs. Fermoy, I believe,” said Mr. Tripsdale, raising his hat in his best manner.

“You have the advantage of me, young man,” she answered. “I don’t remember ever to have seen your face before.”

She was quite close to him as she spoke, and he knew the tug of war had come.

Then the same devil entered into his heart as had taken possession of him the first day he ever saw Aileen, and he rejoined:

“You are right, madam, I have not been here before. Had I been, you would have remembered me. Mine is a nice face, once seen, never forgotten.”

“If you would step outside into the light I’d be better able to judge of that,” retorted Mrs. Fermoy, not in the least disconcerted by Mr. Tripsdale’s generous self-praise.

Her masterly suggestion, however, did not recommend itself to the visitor, who replied:

“Nay, madam. I am sure you never could be so inhospitable as to think of turning me from your door.”

“Don’t madam me,” she exclaimed. “I am none of your trapesing fine madams, but a plain, hardworking woman.”

“Doubtless,” he answered with suavity, “you ought to know best. I, however, should never have described you as plain.”

“Will you get out of my house, please,” cried Mrs.

Fermoy in a rage. "If you stand there much longer and give me any of your nonsense I will call someone who will make you move off pretty quick, I can tell you."

"How cruel you are ! after I have taken the trouble, moreover, of coming all this way with a message for you."

"And who sent you with a message to me ?"

"Miss Fermoy."

"What, Aileen ! Why couldn't you have said that at once instead of beating about the bush ? I thought she would come to her senses before long. Well, and what word has she sent me ?"

"Won't you ask me in that we may talk more comfortably ?"

"No, I think not. You see, though Aileen may know you I don't. You are a stranger to me, and there are things lying loose all over the place that anyone could pick up."

"Do you take me for a thief ?"

"Well, if you will have it ; you seem to me more like a fool ; but as there is never any knowing, you had best deliver your message where you stand."

"Just as you please ; it does not matter to me, but it may matter to the lady who begged that I would come to you."

"The lady"—with withering sarcasm—"did not beg you to talk as if you were an idiot, I suppose."

"No, madam ; I beg your pardon. No, she did not. I am vain enough to imagine she thought my natural manner so good there was not any need for me to assume a different character."

"Well, I'm sure !"

"So am I."

"Of what ?"

"That you are going to ask me in."

"Indeed I'm not. You can just as well tell me what my step-daughter says where we are as any place else. She wants to come back, I suppose."

"I have not heard her express any wild desire to do so."

"Still she has sent you here, and I know very well that means she has come out of her tantrums and finds there's no place like home."

"I heard a woman in the street singing a statement to that effect as I came along," said Mr. Tripsdale politely, making conversation.

"You may tell her from me," went on Mrs. Fermoy, "that though she treated me shameful and behaved cruel wicked, in letting the business that I could have made keep us all in comfort, slip into the bad hands she did for a mere trifle, I bear no malice. I never was hard to her from the day I married her father—an evil day it was for me, too; and I am not going to begin now. There's her room just as she left it. She can sleep in it to-night if they've had enough of her where she is gone. May be it's with some friend of your own she's taken up."

"It is very kind of you to express yourself so handsomely," replied Mr. Tripsdale, avoiding an answer to Mrs. Fermoy's last suggestion.

"There's no accounting for tastes, and Aileen was always a queer girl. Her father before her was strange, and that sort of thing runs in a family," returned Mrs. Fermoy, taking Mr. Tripsdale's speech as an assent; "but that has neither part nor lot in what I was saying. She must have got tired of whoever she's with, or more likely they've got tired of her. It is not everyone who would put up with her tantrums as I did. What I said before, though I'll stick to. You tell her by-gones shall be by-gones, and when she comes back I'll cast nothing at her, and we'll all try and do the best we can. The 'round,' has gone past praying for to be sure. That crafty Mrs. Stenbridge, she thought so much more of than she did of her own flesh and blood, has skimmed the cream clean off the green-grocery trade in this part of Battersea, but there's the good-will of a snug little wardrobe shop to let, and

the whole thing could be had for £25 down, and £25 more, payable by monthly instalments. It's a nice, genteel business, is a wardrobe shop, and would be more to her mind than coals and potatoes, and no doubt the friend that lent her £30 would lend her £30 again. She ought to see about it at once, however, as it's sure to be snapped up. Will you bear that in your mind, and tell her what I say?"

"Well, no," answered Mr. Tripsdale. "I do not think I will. Though I never kept a wardrobe shop myself, I have no doubt it is a very charming profession, and one which brings a person into daily association with the nobility and others; still, enticing as it may be, I fancy it would not exactly attract Miss Fermoy."

"Oh! you don't; perhaps you fancy she wants to sit with her hands folded all day long."

"That idea did not occur to me; perhaps if you would allow me to deliver my message, it might save trouble."

"And who has ever hindered you from delivering your message, if you have one?"

"Yourself, Mrs. Fermoy. Most interesting, though all your observations must be considered, they have tended to delay the communication with which I am charged."

"Let's hear it now then, without any more humming and hawing."

"Peep—bo—h—" yelled a shrill voice at this juncture.

"Keek—ko—h—" screamed an even shriller falsetto.

Mr. Tripsdale, though not given to nervous tremor, jumped almost out of his light summer suit, at this unexpected and unseemly interruption, and before he could recover his composure, he was hustled against the wall by Mrs. Fermoy, who rushed past him in a wild fury, only in time to see Bertie and Minnie disappearing round the corner, from which coign of security their peals of derisive laughter came echoing back along Field Prospect Road.

"Just wait till I catch you, you young imps!" panted forth Mrs. Fermoy, returning breathless from her unsuccessful foray. "I don't think any woman was ever so plagued as I am," she went on in a voice choked with passion. "I do my best for one and all, and this is the sort of return I get from those who ought to know better, down to those who know nothing, and can be taught nothing. Will you be pleased to move a step from the door, for I must shut it, or those Sodoms and Gomorrachs will be in again," following on which Scriptural and eloquent peroration there ensued a loud bang, and Mr. Tripsdale found himself cut off from retreat in a passage, lighted only by the blaze that danced on the walls of what he concluded to be a kitchen.

"Now then, if you please," said Mrs. Fermoy, as a delicate hint that her visitor was at liberty to proceed.

"Miss Fermoy wished to know how you were," he began. "I suppose I may report that you are pretty well."

"You did not come here only for that, I suppose?" she retorted.

"Not entirely, but she would like to hear news of your health."

"When she comes herself, I'll tell her how I am."

"If she wait till then she will, I fear, remain for a considerable time in ignorance," replied Mr. Tripsdale.

"Do you mean to say she is not coming back?"

"So far as I can judge, she has not the faintest intention of visiting the sylvan shades of Battersea."

"And have you the impudence to stand up, and tell me that in my own house?"

"It is by your wish, not mine, that I am standing up."

"Do you mean it was all gammon what you said about Aileen, coming home?"

"I never said she was coming home, though you did."

"Where is she?"

"That I cannot tell you."

"Will not tell me, I suppose, you mean."

"Will not, if you prefer that reading."

"Come along into the light till I get a better look at you."

"Certainly, madam, I beg your pardon, certainly with pleasure," and Mr. Tripsdale gaily walked into the kitchen, where he sat without waiting to be invited, while Mrs. Fermoy struck a match, and applied it to the wick, of a paraffin lamp, which she turned up till it smoked, when she "dratted" the thing, and waxed exceeding wroth.

After that she beat the fire with a poker, with the intention of extracting an even brighter flame from the glowing coals, and then suddenly turning on Mr. Tripsdale, asked,

"Will you tell me where my stepdaughter is now?"

"Though you heat the burning fiery furnace till seven times seven, I will not," replied this modern martyr, firmly.

"You won't?"

Mr. Tripsdale shook his head.

"Who is she with, then, if that is not a secret too?"

"An old lady."

"An old lady!" she repeated, with scornful emphasis. "Aileen'll like being at her beck and call, I'm sure."

"I hope she will, but I have no information on the subject."

"And what do they do?"

"There again I am at fault, but my impression is that in

'Books and works and healthful play,
They wile the joyous hours away.'

The quotation may not be quite accurate, for my classics have grown somewhat rusty, but for present purposes it is near enough."

Mrs. Fermoy glared at the speaker, as though she

would have liked to scratch his face, but Mr. Tripsdale, though really delighted in the fun, sat with an innocent, satisfied expression on his face, as though he had given utterance to something pleasant and original.

"How do they live?" demanded the exasperated lady, after a pause, during which she was casting about to find some form of question to which this maddening young man would be forced to return a straightforward reply.

"Pretty well, I believe," answered Mr. Tripsdale, sweetly. "I have never been honored with an invitation to share their modest meal, but I should say, certainly, they live pretty well."

"That'll suit Aileen; she always could bring a good appetite to her meals if they were to her taste, and now she's doing so well herself she has not a thought to spare for those who kept her from starvation."

"On the contrary, she has thought about you, which is the reason I am here."

"To ask if I'm well, as if it was likely I should be well, as if I could be well," and Mrs. Fermoy laughed hysterically.

"Perhaps you will kindly tell me how you are affected," said Mr. Tripsdale, in a sympathetic tone, "I know Miss Fermoy would be greatly interested."

"I don't know whether you are just out of Colney Hatch or not, but——"

"Oh! dear no," interrupted this extraordinary ambassador, "I never was inside Colney Hatch. I assure you I am quite sane, as you will say if you are kind enough to listen to me for a few minutes."

"Listen to you! Haven't I been listening for this half-hour, hoping to hear some word of sense?"

"No, you have been cutting across me continually. Now, let us take it in turn. Let me have a chance, and then you shall have one; let me speak, and then you shall speak. That is fair, isn't it?"

Mrs. Fermoy could only stare at him in reply, his

coolness took away her breath, and she remained silent while her temper was gathering for a storm.

"That's right," said Mr. Tripsdale, as though she had been a naughty child trying to be good; "now we shall get on," and he drew his chair a little nearer to the table on which he placed his crossed hands. Then looking blandly at Mrs. Fermoy who stood with her back to the fire, roasting gradually, he proceeded:

"Your step-daughter, though anxious about your general health, did not commission me to journey to this salubrious and beautiful suburb merely to give her love and ask if you were well. She thought as even thirty pounds will not last for an indefinite period that you might be getting a little anxious about money matters."

"Getting a little anxious about money matters! as if I ever was anything else or ever could be, with rent to pay and a big family to keep, and not a penny coming in except what I can make, since that ungrateful girl sold the good business to a stranger and left me in the lurch to meet all comers in the gate."

Mr. Tripsdale had not the faintest idea what Mrs. Fermoy meant by this figure of speech, but he was much too wily to say so. He only shook his head and looked sympathetic, the while he racked his brain to consider how he should communicate to this dreadful woman the extent of Aileen's generosity, which he felt greatly inclined to curtail, for a time at all events, and would have curtailed but for the difficulty of again visiting Battersea within a few days.

"There can be no doubt," he began at last, after Mrs. Fermoy had committed another assault on the fire, and flung down the poker with a force which made the fender rattle in every joint, "that Miss Fermoy thought of all the matters you mention. She is not without experience, and now that she is pretty well settled her wish is to relieve you of anxiety as far as possible."

"What's she going to do?" interrupted Mrs. Fer-

moy. "If she has no notion of coming back and putting her shoulder to the wheel, how does she suppose I am to drag the cart along?"

"She is going to make you an allowance," blurted out Mr. Tripsdale, discreetly declining any discussion concerning Mrs. Fermoy's indicated labor of Hercules.

"Oh! indeed. I'm glad to hear she's got so high up in the world she can talk of allowances. How much does she intend to spare from her earnings to help us out of the workhouse?"

"What should you say to a pound a week?"

"When I have paid fourteen and nine a week for the rent of this house and eighteen pence to the back of that for the shed that Mrs. Stenbridge left empty, and that no man, much less any woman, will ever look at, and that the landlord won't take off my hands nor bate a farthing off the one and six, a pound will leave me a lot for wood and coal and light, to say nothing of food, won't it."

"Well, if she could manage two?"

"That would be better, but still just in a manner starvation. It is not as if my eldest son was in work; when he is he brings home his three and four pounds a week; ay, and when he has been working good overtimes, I've known him earn as much as five pound ten on country jobs."

"Then," said Mr. Tripsdale, "you ought to be millionaires."

"What are they?"

"People beyond the world—people who laid by money when they had it and put it out like that fellow in the Bible and made more of it, and more again, till they are able to live without doing any work at all."

"And how are poor folks such as ourselves to put by money?"

"Why, surely you never spent five pounds a week?"

"Ay, indeed did we, and five more to the back of it, many and many's the time," replied Mrs. Fermoy

with a thrill of pride. "You don't suppose I've always been the poor slave you see me now. In my first husband's time I had my silk dress and gold watch and chain, and kept a servant, too."

"Did you, really?" said Mr. Tripsdale, as though awed by such reminiscences of former grandeur.

"Yes, indeed I did: there was never any make believe about me. We worked hard and we lived well, and I'm not going to starve myself now for anybody. It may suit a whip-snap of a clerk to pinch his stomach to put decent clothes on his back, but I don't hold myself with them as sits down and stints themselves in food—or drapery goods, either—and so you may tell my step-daughter, for I have no notion of working my fingers to the bone that she may live on the fat of the land. The idea!" and Mrs. Fermoy banged the fire again in a really alarming manner.

"In a sentence, then, I will tell you what Miss Fermoy is prepared to do, though whether she is wise in attempting so much is quite another question."

"And a question that is no concern of yours, I suppose."

"In one way you are quite right. As I have not to find the money, it is no concern of mine. All the same, however, I feel very sorry she is taking upon her to pay you five pounds a week."

"And where does she think she's going to get five pounds a week for herself, to say nothing of me?" asked Mrs. Fermoy, incredulously.

"No doubt she knows her own affairs better than I do. Let that be as it may, however, she has commissioned me to say that you shall receive five pounds a week, and that in addition she will pay the rent of this house."

"And how am I to know this is not all your humbug?"

"A five pound note is not humbug," said Mr. Tripsdale, producing that pretty trifle, as well as a sheet of paper on which he had drawn out a formal

acknowledgment of the transaction. "If you will be good enough to sign this receipt I need not intrude upon you any longer."

Mrs. Fermoy looked at the speaker with great significance. "No, no, young man," she replied with terrible calmness, "you don't catch me that way. I am not such a fool as to put my hand to paper. Take up your flash note and be off before my son comes in. Here he is," she added, as Mr. Connollan opened the front door with a latch-key and trampled heavily along the passage. "He'll break every bone in your body," was the encouraging assurance with which she ended her sentence.

The position was not pleasant, and Mr. Tripsdale wished for a moment he had never embarked on such an enterprise, but he was no coward, and hope which springs eternal, as we know, induced him to believe Mr. Connollan might be more accessible to argument than his mother. For these reasons, and also because he did not well know how to get out, he kept his seat and greeted the new comer with a polite "Good-evening, sir."

"Evening," returned Mr. Connollan, surlily.

"You're just in time, Tom," said Mrs. Fermoy. "This young fellow says he has brought a five-pound note from Ally, and wants me to put my hand to paper about it."

"There's no compulsion," remarked Mr. Tripsdale. "If you don't want the money, I can take it with me," and he was about to replace the money in his pocket when Mr. Connollan said, in a gruff voice:

"Leave that where it is."

"I will leave it with pleasure," answered the other, "if Mrs. Fermoy is kind enough to sign the receipt."

"We know nothing about receipts here," returned Mr. Connollan. "If Ally could trust you with £5, she can trust us better."

"I don't believe it is a good note," struck in Mrs. Fermoy.

"We'll soon make sure," observed Mr. Connollan, lifting the note from the table and walking out of the kitchen and the house.

"Now you see what you have done," said Mrs. Fermoy, in a tone of awe-stricken reproach, for she had not been at all prepared for such a flank movement, and it cowed her for a moment.

"What have I done?" asked Mr. Tripsdale.

"He'll not be back for hours," she answered.

Mr. Tripsdale made no comment, but sat on in silence. He knew he would make a mistake if he attempted to move.

"Have you nothing to do, young man?" asked Mrs. Fermoy at last.

"It is a leisure evening, madam. My time is quite at your service," he replied, with grave civility, rather pleased at the turn affairs had taken and wondering what would happen next.

There ensued another pause, which Mrs. Fermoy employed in blowing up the fire with a pair of disreputable bellows.

"If *you've* nothing to do," she said at last, flinging the bellows aside in a fury, "I have, and the sooner you go and let me finish my work the better I'll be pleased."

"And what answer am I to take to Miss Fermoy?"

"Tell 'Miss Fermoy' if she wants an answer she'll have to come for one herself. Pretty thing, indeed, sending a stranger to make such a disturbance in a decent house!"

CHAPTER XV.

IN THE CITY.

Mr. Thomas Desborne's idea of teaching Aileen something of her country's history by means of object lessons proved a very happy inspiration. No longer had Miss Simpson to toil painfully through names and dates, to retire in mental disorder from the Wars of the Roses, and to confess sadly that, though the Spanish Armada never conquered England, it had for the time being vanquished her. No longer were her pupil's cheeks hot and flushed by reason of unsuccessful forays among the Saxons, the Normans, the Tudors, and the Stuarts ; no longer did she sadly think that if ease of manner and elegance of deportment were only to be obtained through a thorough acquaintance with the manifold sins of all the monarchs who had misruled Britain she might as well give up the matter at once and remain an uncultured dunce !

By Mr. Desborne's beneficent method, however, she knew as much in a month of English history as the fondest parent could have desired ; a vast deal more, in fact, than the majority of fond parents are ever likely to know themselves.

From the day she was permitted to find out for herself who Jack Cade, the Irish impostor, really was, why he struck London stone with his sword and exclaimed, "Now is Mortimer Lord of this City," why he beheaded Lord Say, why his followers forsook him, and why he was obliged to shelter "in the woods of Sussex," her interest in the wonderful story, or rather series of stories, London has to tell those of her children who

really love the city, never flagged. As though it had been a tragedy of her own day, she read how the then Government offered a reward of a thousand marks to the person that should take the rebel alive or dead, how before long he was discovered in a garden at Hothfield, in Sussex, by one Alexander Eden, a Kentish gentleman, who endeavored to apprehend him, but Cade, being possessed of "courage, capacity, and spirit, fought till he was killed on the spot, and his body being brought to London, his head was cut off and fixed on London Bridge, together with the heads of nine of his accomplices."

All this was new to Miss Simpson, who, however, received the information with a lady-like abstention from comment which induced Aileen to believe Jack's doings were familiar to her as household words. To the end of her life Timothy Fermoy's daughter will never see nor hear of London Stone without beholding as in a vision that "great conference of people, and the Lord Mayor among the rest," who stood and listened while the "Kentish rebel" made his lying declaration and then allowed him to return to Southwark without let or hindrance.

That was her first introduction to a realm more full of romance, more entrancingly interesting than any fairy kingdom, any land inhabited by giants, any country where knights go forth to seek adventures, and fair ladies lie wrapt in slumber at the wicked will of evil magicians.

For there is nothing told of the city by ancient chroniclers which has not happened in it, and the joys and sorrows, the great aspirations and the woful reverses experienced by the men and the women who once trod the then rude pavements and who have long moldered into dust, thrill the hearts that to-day listen to the old tales even as the tears shed by Phaltiel nearly three thousand years ago unseal some fountain of sympathy lying deep and hidden in our own breasts and make us mourn with the man who, when com-

manded to part from his wife, "went with her along weeping behind her to Bahurim."

It was a happy time which ensued for Aileen—a time, indeed, so happy for them all that it never could return. The glamour of those evenings in the city, the mysterious stillness of the old churches, the silence of the lanes, the spectacle of the moonlight lying weird and bright across the paved graveyards shining on the blackened trunks and branches of the almost leafless trees, the strange gloom that enfolded out-of-the-way courts and alleys on nights when, but for gas, London would have been enwrapped in Egyptian darkness, stole softly into Aileen's soul, excited her imagination, awoke something that had never before started from slumber at the sound of human voice.

After the first few evenings Miss Simpson did not as a rule accompany her charge in those expeditions. She had arrived at that time of life, though not for worlds would she have expressed the fact, when a lady may with a certain grace prefer remaining at home to rambling abroad, keeping the domestic fire warm rather than making acquaintance with ancient tombs and the sites of demolished churches, and it was for this reason that Aileen's duenna often stated, while partaking of tea in Cloak Lane, that she had a slight cold, or felt something of a chill, and consequently thought she would do wisely not to venture to church.

Mr. Desborne she knew might be trusted not to lead Aileen astray. Though so "wonderfully young for his age," he nevertheless had reached an age when it was competent for him to walk a hundred yards, or two hundred, or even more, with a girl, and yet not compromise her. Moreover, he was, after a fashion, Miss Fermoy's guardian—all the guardian, at least, she had, and Miss Simpson, in the recesses of her cultivated mind, confessed she did not care for mouldy old churches and the extraordinary odor of roast goose and defunct citizens that pervades so many of those musty edifices. For all of which reasons and for this

further reason, repeated to Aileen in strict confidence :

"Fact is, my dear, the loss of my little fortune has tried me more than any mere monetary trouble ought to have done. It was such a shock, and such a terrible period of anxiety supervened, I believe I feel fifteen years older in consequence, and as I do not know what the future may have in store, I want, while I can, thanks to your kindness, to take a little care of myself, and do so. Health is all I have now, and if I can only keep that, I shall not much fear for the future. I hope, therefore, you will not think me unkind if I often say I fancy I should not be wise to expose myself to the chance of contracting an illness."

Very truthfully Aileen replied that she should never think such a precaution unkind.

The fact was that she much preferred a duet with Mr. Desborne to a trio, in which Miss Simpson took a bad third. All that lady's notes about the city were, if not absolutely discordant, a little uncertain.

Her heart was not in the music. She often wished Mr. Thomas Desborne's tastes lay more strongly in some other direction. She was so loyal to present royalty that had the lawyer taken to read aloud the Court Circular, the erudite sentences of that paper, "corrected by her Most Gracious Majesty," would have sounded sweeter in her ears than any old world stories connected with Henry's manly daughter.

Not without reason she imagined there was as much interest in our modern times when history is being made, as in recalling the old days when history had been made, but Mr. Desborne did not share this opinion, and caused her to yawn unseen while delivering himself of the following sentence, a sample of many to which she was forced to listen :

"Being to dedicate any church, he (Swithin, Bishop of Winchester) neither used horse nor any secular pomp, but being accompanied with his clerics and those of his family, with all humility he went barefoot

to the place. His feasting was not with the rich, but with the needy and poor. His mouth was always open to invite sinners to repentance, he even admonished those who were standing to beware of falling, and such as had fallen to arise again without delay," with much more to the same effect.

Was it any marvel that, with her proclivities, Miss Simpson usually preferred an easy chair in Mr. Desborne's room to heated churches and chill night air, and, in preference to explanations and lectures concerning old saints, former kings, dead and gone citizens, mythical legends, and foolish epitaphs culled from the chronicles of forgotten churches, a snug chat with Mrs. Kidder, who never appeared to remove what she called the "teaboard" till she heard the outer door close, when she descended from her eyrie in the roof, and, making a feint to put coal on the fires and brush every speck of dust from the hearth, entered affably into conversation on the subject of the Desbornes, present and past, present particulars and unlimited admiration being largely drawn from her own memory and observation.

So past history having been "culled" from the reminiscences of "poor old Mrs. Chitty, who took care of the offices in King's Yard, girl and wife, for forty years, for she first helped her mother in the time of Mr. Thomas's father and grandfather, and when Mrs. Savage, her mother, got past her work, Mr. Robert Desborne pensioned her off; and then Mrs. Chitty and her husband—he was in the employment of Messrs. Graytook & Co., the great turkey merchants—lived on the premises, and were in a manner of speaking owners of the place, only getting wages all the time and sitting rent free, and with lots of allowances and perquisites, till Chitty his health broke, when they went to live in Salters Rents, when she, Mrs. Kidder, had a dish of tea with them more times than she would care to count. Mrs. Chitty always spoke of Mr. Robert and Mr. Frederick Desborne just beautiful: but to her (Mrs. Kidder's) notion there was not one of them—and she allowed

they were all good—still there was not one of them a patch on Mr. Thomas, and she did not care who heard her say so.”

“He is very nice, certainly,” replied Miss Simpson, a little conscious tremor agitating her voice, “but his nephew is very nice too.”

“He is,” agreed Mrs. Kidder. “I have not a word to say about Mr. Edward but what is good. Meet him whenever and where you will, he’s always the same, and what he gives away is just unknown, but when all is said and done give me Mr. Thomas, he has the mind of a man and the heart of a woman, as I heard a person once remark, and I’ve proved the truth of those words times out of number. I am sure the first day I ever saw that young lady Miss Fermoy, her own mother could not have thought more about her than he did. A sweet young lady I call her, and one I’ve heard that has come into a great fortune.”

“I believe she has succeeded to a considerable fortune,” answered Miss Simpson, for the housekeeper finished her sentence as if she meant it for a question.

“I thought so; not that I asked for curiosity, because I have never made myself busy about any matter that did not concern me, but when Mr. Desborne brought her up here, he told me she had been a bit upset, and said I was to see to her, which I did, and which I would see to anyone in trouble, more particularly one he wanted looked after. Well, I got her everything I could think of, and she thanked me very prettily and went away, and I forgot all about the matter till one evening when a brown paper parcel came directed to me, and inside there was the beautifullest dress, some sort of dark brown cloth, with trimmings and linings all complete, and a letter from Miss Fermoy saying she hoped I would accept the gown as a little present from her, and that she enclosed a sovereign to pay for the making.

“I could not think what to do, for I had never heard of such a thing as a dress length and a pound

just for taking in a cup of tea and a basin of water, so I put the matter before my master, and asked his advice.

"He laughed, and told me not to be uneasy. 'Miss Fermoy can afford to be a little generous,' he said, and that was how I came to know, and also by a word Mr. Knevitt dropped afterward."

Mrs. Kidder's account of the transaction was quite true.

Aileen had done a gracious act in a manner so simple and quiet that Mr. Thomas Desborne felt greatly pleased when he heard of it, though the thought passed through his mind, "This girl will need guidance or she will ruin herself."

As time went on, however, he saw there was so much common-sense mixed with her generosity that he did not obtrude any—beyond general—advice upon her. His only desires as regarded Timothy Fermoy's daughter came indeed at last to be, just to secure a good client for his firm, and second to help to fit her for the rank Shawn Fermoy's money entitled her to fill. There were many things she could never learn he knew, but he felt assured she might learn most things necessary to enable her to mix with gentlewomen. Because many excellent wives and mothers are destitute of accomplishments, and after all French and German, music and drawing are not absolutely necessary ingredients in the happiness of a home.

Those weeks about the city, those attendances at evening service, those talks about the men and women who had made history, and who, as long as the memory of London survives, must ever be connected with its streets and lanes, its ancient churches, ay, the very ground whereon new blocks of buildings stand, and over which new thoroughfares run, may be said to have begun Aileen's higher education.

She took to learning thus presented as a thirsty man takes to water. From the old wells of English literature undefiled, she drank deep draughts. No need

for Miss Simpson to prescribe a course of reading after Mr. Desborne had once indicated the books he thought she might like, and that he considered might teach her much she ought to know. Aileen would have pored over them from morning till night.

About the fitness of many of these books for a young person's perusal, Miss Simpson entertained grave doubts, but Mr. Desborne so emphatically pooh-poohed her hesitating objections that the poor lady retired vanquished though not convinced.

To the lawyer this new experience proved delightful. For years he had not enjoyed anything so thoroughly as trotting Aileen up and down the city lanes and delivering lectures as they paced quiet courts and unfrequented alleys. To the ignorance of a child she added the intelligence of a woman. With the quick sympathy and questioning curiosity of youth, there was combined the thoughtful reflection of maturer life and the tendency to institute comparisons and deduce conclusions natural to a person who has experienced sorrow and tried to reconcile the apparent inequalities and hardships of life with a belief in Infinite goodness and wisdom.

Her faith was very firm, and yet for that very reason she spoke sometimes like one who was full of doubts. She had no fear of baring her thoughts ; anything that troubled her, anything that to her comprehension seemed passing strange in this complex world, she talked about without hesitation.

It came to her quite naturally to confide in Mr. Desborne without restraint, and as she was a good listener it grew to seem more than natural to him that he should harangue at length on the topics which lay near to his heart.

"When I am alone in my room at night," he said to her once, "I can forget the busy bustling London of the nineteenth century and fancy myself a citizen residing in my ward of Dowgate, when that ward was surrounded by the houses of the principal nobility, and

think I am a near neighbor of Richard Chaucer, brother of Geoffrey.

"Yes," answered Aileen; "after reading about the tumult at John de Ipres Mansion in St. Thomas the Apostle, I felt like that too. I could not help hoping the knight who hurried from the Savoy would reach the city in time, and though the Duke of Lancaster was such a tyrant I pitied him when he leaped up and fled to the Thames, and then rowed so hard to Lambeth. But," she added with a little hesitation, "do you think that a hundred years from now some one looking back on our days may say what wonderful times we lived in? When you and Miss Simpson were speaking over tea about the rejoicings after the Crimean war and the horror of the Indian Mutiny, I began to consider that those were the sort of things that make the old histories so interesting."

"What you say is true to a certain extent; but the Crimean War and the Indian Mutiny could never make the *City* a place to dream about."

"Not the account of how the troops marched through the city with their bands playing 'The girl I left behind me.' How it was illuminated when the war ended, how the first news of the mutiny thrilled the heart of London—you said so, Mr. Desborne—and was flashed to every town and village in the Three Kingdoms, carrying sorrow and dismay into lordly mansions and quiet rectories, into houses from which the squires' daughters had married and gone abroad with their husbands, and poor cottages that had also given their hostages to fortune."

"You are right. I did not know you were listening so attentively, yet, still, bad as all that was, it is not like history made on our very doorsteps."

"Then what about the Prince Consort's death, when London was in mourning, and the bells were clammed, and it seemed as if in each household one was missing; what about the Duke of Wellington's funeral, and the Prince of Wales's marriage, and the pageant when he

and the Danish Princess made their State progress through the city ; what about the Thanksgiving at St. Paul's when the Queen and the Prince of Wales and persons high and mighty went there to return thanks ? ”

“ Too near, my child, by far ; we must stand at a certain distance in order to see events in their true proportion.”

“ But when these events are two or three hundred years old, those who come after us will be able to see them properly, will they not ? ”

“ They will never see them as we see King Henry the Second and Wat Tyler in Smithfield, as we see Eleanor Conham walking barefoot from the ‘ Standard ’ to St. Paul's, as we see King Henry and Queen Katherine in the Black Friars when the Queen walked out of the court, leaning on the arm of one of her servants, and refused to return, though the crier called her by these words, ‘ Katherine, Queen of England ! ’ No, the times are changed. England is picturesque no longer, neither is the city, save for its memories, interesting any more.”

“ Do you think not, sir ? ”

“ Do you think it is ? ”

“ I am not able to say what I feel right, I know, but I have it in my mind that wherever there are a number of people a great many things must be happening.”

“ Of a commonplace kind, yes.”

“ You must not be vexed, sir, if I try to tell you what I mean.”

“ I shall be very much vexed if you ‘ Sir ’ me again.”

“ It slips my memory ; I am sorry,” she answered, receiving his half laughing rebuke as was her wont. “ I understand partly why you say England is not picturesque any longer, and I know the times are changed and the ways are different no doubt, but still men and women are the same.”

“ How do you make that out ? ”

“Why—” and she paused for a moment, “they can’t be different. All the time those wars and rebellions and executions were going on there must have been houses where people lived and slept and dressed and had their meals and were vexed and pleased, just as we live and sleep, and eat and are vexed and pleased now. I can’t believe the world was so very different then from the world we see.”

Mr. Desborne shook his head. “It was very different,” he declared. “I cannot imagine why you should believe otherwise.”

“I will tell you sir, what I have thought. After my father’s death I had a good few books, many of them nice books, that had been given to him, or that he had bought, for he was fond of reading, but one by one they got lost or torn, so at last there was none left but my mother’s bible, which would have gone, too, only I laid it past and never let the children get hold of it.”

“Yes?” said Mr. Desborne, interrogatively.

“Well, I read a few verses every day, as many another does, and they might as well have been Latin or Greek for anything I understood of what they meant, till one Sunday I chanced to hear the clergyman read about Joseph and his brethren, which sounded as it had never done before, and when I got home I thought I would like to go through that again; and so by degrees I read a great deal over and over till I gathered some sense out of what I read, and found the book was full of stories about people being fond of each other and hating each other, some trying to be good, and more letting themselves be wicked, and though maybe you’ll think me foolish, sir, and talking concerning things I don’t rightly understand, when I hear about a husband and wife doting on one another, I think Jacob and Rachel did the same thousands of years ago, and he had to part from and bury her, as many a man has had to do since; and he had trouble with his sons, just as we read almost every day some father’s heart is broken with unruly children; and Cain

and Abel did not agree, the same way brothers disagree every day now; and Jacob cheated Esau, and they fell out, though they made it up afterward; and think how false Delilah was to Samson, and how Saul turned against David. Oh! sir, I think if you'd take a look through the New and the Old Testament you would come round to think, as people have not changed in three or four thousand years, it is not likely they have greatly altered since the times of those kings and queens who were feasted in the city, and did so much that was wrong and made their subjects miserable."

If they had been walking along one of the great thoroughfares in the city this speech which Aileen poured forth from her heart could never have been made, but, as it chanced, immediately before the talk began they were turning into Trinity Square, which was almost deserted, and from thence pursued a devious way through a maze of quiet lanes and silent courts into Fenchurch Street, when Mr. Desborne said:

"You are a good girl, and have interested, though not converted, me. I am like a man in love. I think nothing at all resembles the city of my choice. To me its very defects seem virtues. If Sir Christopher Wren's plans had been carried out in their integrity we might, it is true, have possessed a beautiful town, but not an interesting one; we should have lacked the quaint corners, the unexpected courts, the queer passages, the narrow alleys, some of which I am going to show you now."

Though he thus turned the conversation, however, what the girl had said pleased Mr. Desborne well.

"It is not," he observed afterward to Miss Simpson, "that her remarks are particularly original, or contain an idea especially worth remembering, but they prove she has begun to exercise her reasoning faculties, and that she is deriving both enjoyment and profit from your admirable instruction."

"Say rather from yours, Mr. Desborne," answered

the lady. "Till you opened up this mine of interest, any attempts at teaching resulted only in failure."

"Not so," he replied. "What could my poor efforts effect if you did not second them so admirably? Really, when I think of the improvement—a couple of months, that is the time, is it not?"

"Say about twelve weeks, certainly not more."

"When I see," amended Mr. Desborne, "the change twelve short weeks have wrought, I am lost in admiration of your system, whatever it may be. Miss Fermoy is a different person in manners, speech, appearance, mien. If something less than three months have produced such an alteration, what, I ask myself, may not a year effect?"

Miss Simpson shook her head sadly, and said, "She will never be other than a homely person," which in her sense meant that Aileen need never expect to moult the poor dingy feathers of her earlier life and assume the gorgeous plumage which in society makes such fine birds out of even very inferior fowl.

"And what," asked Mr. Desborne, "does any sensible man want other than a 'homely' wife to bless his hearth, to be the mother of his children, his friend in joy, his comforter in sorrow, his stay in health and sickness? Aileen Fermoy may never be a brilliant talker, an accomplished linguist, or a clever musician, but she will be an angel in the house she enters. Charles Lamb had his dream children, if you remember; surely I may have my dream daughter? If heaven had given me a daughter in reality I should have wished her exactly to resemble this girl as she is now in nature, as she will be in other respects at the end of next year."

"And I am sure," agreed Miss Simpson, "if I could choose a daughter it would be one who in every way resembled my pupil."

Miss Simpson was not, as a rule, an untruthful woman; indeed, in the main she was truth itself, yet this speech could but be considered a free reading of

“Love me, love my dog.” Any girl Mr. Desborne had chosen mentally to adopt would have been equally dear to her, and it was only for this reason she chimed in when he praised Aileen, because, certainly, that young person differed greatly from the “elegant females” immortalized by some early novelists—delicate heroines who always dressed in white muslin, fainted on the smallest provocation or on none, did nothing useful, played the harp (badly), and in and out of season warbled sentimental ditties to an accompaniment on the guitar, who were the fashion in fiction long ago, and who still ideally survive in the minds of many worthy people who ought to have more sense.

“Our pleasant evenings will soon be things of the past,” said Mr. Desborne, after a pause, during which he was, perhaps, wandering with Eli through the sad, fair land called “Might have been.” “They have been very delightful to me. What shall I do without them—and you?”

A pregnant question, Miss Simpson thought, and yet a most ridiculous one; because, if the speaker had really felt the evenings delightful, if truly he did not know what he should do without them or her, it was in his own power to secure their continuance and her companionship till death ended both.

The poor lady's heart stood still. Like all things long-looked forward to, the desired end had come upon her very suddenly. She was as one who hears the warning given before some hour earnestly desired, and holds his breath so as to catch the first stroke which tells it has arrived. Supper was over in York Terrace. Mr. Desborne sat in an easy-chair drawn up to the hearth. Miss Simpson, on the opposite side, sat in another easy-chair, pushed a little further from the fire, for, like all good women, she was careful of her complexion. The whole scene struck her as domestic in the extreme, not to say conjugal. Aileen had gone to her own room somewhat tired, she said, but that was as it might be. “A good girl—a very

good girl," considered Miss Simpson, for the moment unreservedly adopting Mr. Desborne's opinion of her pupil; "careful never to allow herself to be *de trop*, possessed of as much delicate tact as many higher born and better instructed lack."

A truly nice, good girl; in fact, sweet-tempered, thoughtful, capable of great improvement, somewhat homely, no doubt, as she, Miss Simpson, had observed, but that, Mr. Desborne had nicely put it, was a good quality in a woman.

It would be a charming quality if they were all to live together a truly happy family.

Miss Simpson could not picture a more blessed future than that they three might spend, Mr. Desborne going each morning to business and returning evening after evening to a comfortable home presided over by a competent and refined gentlewoman, and gladdened with the presence of an adopted daughter.

For a moment she closed her eyes so as more fully to enjoy the picture. When she opened them again Mr. Desborne was looking at her as though expecting some answer, but Miss Simpson found an answer difficult to make.

His question had been plain enough, yet what could she say in reply which might bring matters to a satisfactory conclusion?

It was impossible for her to point out that the way to a perpetuity of such pleasant evenings as he spoke of lay through the church-door, not church-doors, but one specially selected, where, with ring and all things "decent and in order," he, Thomas, should take her, Frances, to have and to hold for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer.

"We shall not have many more of these pleasant evenings," he said, varying the form of his previous remark, but not its spirit. "Perhaps, however, they were not so agreeable to you as to me. I often thought you must have felt lonely sitting in my dull room

while Miss Fermoy and I were in some old church or roaming about the city."

"Lonely, Mr. Desborne!" repeated Miss Simpson, "in that delightful room surrounded by every comfort, knowing that you were enjoying the happiness of forming Miss Fermoy's mind and leading her to contemplate the great events of past history! No, indeed. I never felt happier than while musing on the present and speculating concerning the future. Cloak Lane will always remain in my memory as a very haven of rest and peace."

"I am so glad!" said Mr. Desborne; "but then I always thought you one of the most unselfish persons I ever met."

"Such praise is undeserved," murmured Miss Simpson.

"My opinion was formed when I enjoyed ample opportunities for observation," he persisted.

"We shall be going to Teddington very soon," remarked Miss Simpson, modestly shifting the conversation from her own merits, and leading it back toward the point she desired to reach.

"I feared such would be the case from something my nephew said yesterday."

"He and Mrs. Desborne have generally returned to town much earlier than November."

"Yes, I fail quite to understand this new departure."

"Mrs. Desborne has never before been in Dorsetshire at this season."

"That is true. On the other hand, her husband has not been in the habit of remaining at Ashwater even for a week when his wife was absent."

"He has the boy——"

"Yes, he has the boy." And there was a pause.

"Mrs. Desborne wishes us to go down on the seventh," said Miss Simpson, finding the silence embarrassing and discouraging.

"Indeed! before Lord Mayor's Day; then this will be our last Sunday together."

"For the present," amended Miss Simpson.

"And for me there will be nothing left save memory and anticipation."

Certainly he was very tiresome. It was nice to know he would remember, and pleasant to hear he would look forward, but at a time when it was competent for him to merge both memory and anticipation in present fruition Miss Simpson could not but regard his regrets and longings as absurd.

"Perhaps," she suggested, shyly, feeling she could not let the opportunity slip away quite unimproved, "you might be able to run down to Ashwater 'occasionally.'"

"May I?" he asked, eagerly. "I should like to do so immensely. It would be a delightful change, but I fear I should prove an intruder."

"I must not flatter you, Mr. Desborne," said the lady with diplomatic coyness.

"You are very kind," he answered, in a tone which might have meant anything or nothing, but apparently meant the latter, since he added no further word.

"Mrs. Desborne in her last letter," resumed Miss Simpson, still bent on making conversation, "in a letter, in fact, which I received on Friday, says that if not inconvenient she thinks it might be well if Frederick remained at Ashwater over the winter. She does not consider him strong, and is of opinion he would outgrow his delicacy more quickly in the country than in town. I am of the same opinion."

"And what does his father say?" asked Mr. Desborne, quickly.

"His father agrees with her."

"Perhaps that is the reason he has remained so long at Teddington, too."

"Very probably."

"I have no doubt it is. And can you arrange to have the boy? Will he interfere with your comfort at all?"

"Not in the least. Miss Fermoy is quite delighted

at the prospect of seeing a little after the child. She intends to ask Mrs. Desborne to let her get a favorite donkey down for Fred to ride."

"If I had needed another inducement to visit Teddington frequently, which indeed I did not, Miss Simpson, you have now supplied it," said the lawyer, rising. "I shall go back to my lonely chambers happier to-night for what you have told me. Thank you heartily. Good-by for the present."

"And you really will come to see us?" she said, lingeringly, as she walked with him across the hall.

"Indeed I will—often——"

"Because, you know, we cannot go to see you when we are settled at Ashwater."

"I am not sure of that. I think a way may be arranged out of the difficulty. Good-by again," and Mr. Thomas Desborne pressed Miss Simpson's hand once more, and passed out into the night.

"Really," thought the lady, "there never was so charming and provoking a person!"

CHAPTER XVI.

“TRUTH IF THE——”

On that same Sunday evening when Miss Simpson's expectations were so unduly raised only to be disappointed, two persons sat in the dining-room at Ash-water, one of whom the junior partner would have felt very sorry to see there, whether as client or guest.

For the Desbornes had ever been particular about their clients, as some men are, and all men ought to be, about their friends. For persons who had done wrong, who had wasted their substance, got into debt, fallen from their high estate, they would be sorry, they would do their best, and their best was very good indeed ; but for “shady people,” for those who were always shaving the wind, hovering on the edge of a note, keeping within the letter of the law while infringing its spirit, they entertained no toleration. Over and over again they had declined business on the plea that “it would not suit them,” that it “was out of their line” or “beyond their province,” and so retained their self-respect and lost some money. They had thus won for themselves a high name. To be a client of theirs was almost a certificate of respectability, and certainly no man like the individual who on that Sunday evening sat opposite to the head of the firm in his house at Teddington, had ever before been on familiar terms with any Desborne, whether in his private or professional capacity.

Yet the stranger was not bad looking. Some women would even have called him handsome, for he had the black hair, dark eyes, white teeth, and decided feat-

ures which find favor with the sex, but anyone who knew much about the world, more especially about the business world, would instinctively have shunned his society and declined the honor of his acquaintance.

No man can serve two masters, and this man had so long served his master that Mammon's sign and superscription were set plainly on his forehead for the initiated who ran to read if they chose.

But he did not profess to be other than he was. He never brought his better nature forward in business matters in order to deceive those with whom he dealt ; on the contrary, he always avowed himself a very Shylock. If people did not like his terms, they need have no transactions with him. If they accepted his terms, then they ought not to expect him to modify them. He piqued himself on his honesty and frankness, and was consequently in the habit of uttering unpleasant truths with a want of reticence which some unreasonable persons considered brutal.

In his domestic relations he was a good son, a fond husband, and an indulgent father ; he gave to the poor, and he could be generous to his friends.

As such men go he was not a bad fellow, but the trail of the serpent was over him, and he tortured, even when he had no intention of doing so, or of harrowing his victim's feelings.

A mere glance at Mr. Desborne's face might have sufficed to show he had been under the harrow, the anxious look in his kindly eyes and a strained expression about his mouth spoke eloquently of a very bad quarter of an hour not yet ended.

To his sensitive nature that Sunday afternoon had seemed one long-drawn torture, apparently not one whit nearer its close when a perfect mound of nut-shells mutely recorded the guest's progress through dessert than when he first began operations.

"Those are good filberts," said the stranger, helping himself to a few more. "They are not so large as I have seen, but I do not think that I ever tasted better."

Had any spirit been left in Mr. Desborne he would have liked to suggest that filberts never grew to a greater size, and therefore it was probably cob-nuts to which Mr. Tovey referred, but as matters stood he merely intimated his pleasure at having anything at Ashwater give satisfaction.

"Yes, they are very good—very good indeed," repeated Mr. Tovey, extracting a kernel. "That garden of yours must eat up a lot of money."

Mr. Desborne winced when he replied, "Oh, dear no, it does not cost much."

"Don't tell me," rejoined Mr. Tovey, dogmatically; "I know all about that; there is nothing more expensive than a garden, and nothing which makes poorer returns. You pay a man five-and-twenty shillings a week, I suppose?"

"Three-and-twenty," answered the unhappy employer.

"And he insists on having a man under him at eighteen more?"

"He has only his son, who receives twelve."

"There you are, five-and-thirty a week, ninety pounds a year, to which you must add fuel, and heaven knows what besides. Say, at a very moderate computation, three pounds a week, more, probably four, and two out of every three bunches of grapes sold by the gardener on his own account and for his own profit."

"I do not believe any man cheats me of a penny," said Mr. Desborne, roused to expostulation.

"I notice every employer thinks his gardener honest till he finds him out," returned Mr. Tovey, putting another kernel into his mouth. "You may take my word for it, a garden is a mistake except as a luxury, which you make up your mind to pay for. Those are fine grapes, for instance, but you could buy finer in Covent Garden for half what it costs you to grow them. I'll be bound, if we went into figures, you would find every bunch that is put on your table costs you a guinea, and

every egg you chip a shilling. Country life is a mistake unless you know how to look after your people."

"Do you mean to imply that I do not know how to look after them?"

"I mean to say openly I am positive you don't."

Mr. Desborne knew something about the consequences of letting a verdict go by default, but he lacked courage to speak in his own defence, and indeed he felt very certain no defence would avail him. Though he had never before come into close contact with anyone resembling Mr. Tovey, he decided his best and only course was silence.

"That is a sound wine," said the guest, setting down his glass, which he had emptied, after vainly waiting for some comment on his last speech.

"I am glad you like it," answered Mr. Desborne.

Mr. Tovey refilled his glass and pushed the long, slim bottle over to Mr. Desborne, thus notifying he also might partake of its contents if he listed. "Now, what does this stand you in—seventy?"

"Ninety," was the reply.

"Too dear! far too dear! I could put you in the way of buying as good if not a better wine for half the money."

"You are very kind, but I have as much in my cellar as I am likely to require for some time. Marco-brümm does not suit every one's taste, and I cannot say I greatly care for it myself."

Mr. Tovey regarded the speaker in amazement.

"What wine do you care for?" he asked sarcastically.

Except a good dose of poison or a few ounces of chloroform there was nothing Mr. Desborne ardently desired at that moment; but under the spell of his guest's dark glittering eyes, and perhaps inspired by the recollection of a pleasant evening long past, when some bottles of the American vintage were produced, he answered off-hand "Catawba."

"Pish!" exclaimed Mr. Tovey.

"I like the herby flavor," went on Mr. Desborne, "and the curious bouquet seems to me delightful."

"Pah!" retorted Mr. Tovey.

"Of course I have no wish to impose my tastes on any other person," said Mr. Desborne, in polite protest against his guest's tone.

"You could not succeed in imposing them on me," returned Mr. Tovey, with a decision which must have settled the matter had Mr. Desborne felt any inclination to pursue the argument further.

"You keep no carriage," observed Mr. Tovey, after a short pause devoted to bon-bons and raspberry biscuits. Whether he meant the remark to imply praise or blame, it was impossible to determine, and in no way could have influenced the answer, as Mr. Desborne did not keep a carriage, and said so.

"Neither in town nor here?"

"I keep none anywhere."

"You are wise. On the whole, it is always cheaper to job."

"I do not job; only hire a fly or hansom when necessary."

There was not much to find fault with in this statement. Having framed his indictment so as to include a carriage, it would have been difficult for even Mr. Tovey to suggest that the expense of an occasional hansom or fly was an extravagance too great to be condoned; still he could not refrain from saying,

"Nowadays, when omnibuses and railways almost pass our doors, it is not necessary to hire often."

Mr. Desborne, receiving this as a statement which required no answer, did not make any, wisely leaving it a moot question whether he hired often or refrained from hiring.

Then ensued a pause, during the continuance of which Mr. Tovey's face assumed by degrees a look of deep thought, while the anxious expression in Mr. Desborne's eyes and the strained rigidity of the lines about his mouth became more painfully evident. Perhaps he

grew conscious of this himself after a few moments, for he drew the despised Marcobrümm to him, and, pouring a little out, wet his parched lips, which were dry as those of a man ill with fever.

The action, slight as it was, aroused Mr. Tovey from his reverie. This time he did not again apply himself to the dessert, but arose from the table, and walking across the room opened one of the French windows and stepped out on the verandah. It was a dull November night, but not very dark, and when his sight grew accustomed to the gloom he could see dimly the bare branches of the trees, showing black against the sky, the broad gravelled walk, and the grass beyond, while from still farther off there came a mysterious sound, which he concluded to be caused by the constant flow of water and the rippling of the current around some obstruction.

He took a turn up and down the gravel walk in front of the house, and then bent his steps in the direction of the river, beside which there was a landing-stage with boat-house. He stood leaning against the white railing for a few minutes, listening to the water sobbing and gurgling on its way. The quiet and the solitude of the place seemed strange to him, and for a short time not unpleasant. He could imagine that on a summer evening, in company with a good cigar, it would be nice to loll over those railings and watch the boats going up and down the stream. He thought further he should not object to be in one of the boats, on such a summer evening, going up and down himself. He could not row and he did not wish to row, but people were always to be had, he remembered, who asked nothing better than to be allowed to exhaust themselves, and who liked to be invited down to such a place for a night or two. He had inspected the premises by daylight with Mr. Desborne, and now that he was viewing them by night alone they seemed even more desirable than he imagined to be the case a few hours previously. His heart was full of kindness as he slowly returned to

the house, and when he drew close to the lighted room where Mr. Desborne still sat near the fire, he paused and looked, on the whole approvingly, at an interior which recommended itself to a somewhat luxurious taste.

Of course there were many things he would have preferred altered, suggestions he felt he might make, improvements that ought to be carried out, but these were details, trifles which could soon be set to rights, with which Christian thought he pushed the sash wide and re-entered the room, bringing a rush of cold fresh air with him.

"You have a snug little place here," he said, resuming his former seat.

It had not been the habit of the owner's previous visitors to speak of Ashwater as "little." The house was large and the grounds were extensive, therefore the word seemed offensive rather than affectionate, but Mr. Desborne let it pass.

"Yes," he agreed, "it is a snug place."

"Wants a lot of money laid out on it, though."

"Mr. Hankington, my predecessor, did spend a large amount. He threw out a new wing, rebuilt the stabling, put up a vinery, and greatly improved the grounds."

"That was a long time ago, though."

"Not so very long, only eight years. The vinery was but just finished when he received that Australian appointment."

"And let the place go for an old song?"

"I cannot say about an old song, but it went, I believe, cheap."

"How much did you give for it?"

"I did not give anything, it was my uncle who bought it."

"At what figure about?"

"That I do not know; there is an old saying which tells us we should refrain from looking a gift horse in the mouth."

"Did he give you this place, then?"

"He did."

"By Jove!—but of course such a present was nothing to him!"

Apparently Mr. Desborne was as little able to answer this question as he had been that relating to the purchase-money of Ashwater, at all events he made no reply.

"Come, now, I'll tell you what I'll do," said Mr. Tovey, after a minute's consideration, pushing his plate from him with a vehemence which scattered the nutshells over the cloth, "I'll have a deal with you for this place. I want to help you, and I have been thinking for some time past that if I could pick up a box such as Ashwater, with a bit of land attached—a sound riverside freehold in which I could lay out my money to advantage—I'd buy it. Will what I propose suit you?"

Mr. Desborne turned deadly pale; as he essayed to speak he looked, indeed, white as the snowy tablecloth from which Mr. Tovey was collecting some of the shells that had escaped from his plate, but before his guest lifted his eyes he managed to recover himself, and said:

"I don't think that would quite do. I certainly should not like my uncle to imagine——"

"You are quite right; that did not occur to me," interrupted Mr. Tovey. "No, you ought not to play any tricks with your chances. He will leave everything to you in the ordinary course of events. I see your meaning exactly."

On the face of this earth there never was any idea more widely different from the objection in Mr. Desborne's mind than the one suggested by Mr. Tovey, but when that idea was put thus plainly he acquiesced in it, even while hating himself for doing so.

"He's as rich as a Jew, I suppose," went on the visitor, accepting silence for consent.

"I know nothing whatever about his means. I only know he is the kindest and the best man in the world."

"An observation highly creditable to both parties, I am sure," said Mr. Tovey, in a spirit of irony, but still with a gravity worthy of all praise.

"It is an observation which feebly embodies my real feeling."

"Quite so," agreed Mr. Tovey, nodding. "He must have saved a lot of money."

"He has never been communicative about his private affairs," said Mr. Desborne, coldly.

"Wise men never are. Your share in the business must tot up to something considerable."

"Pretty well. I can't complain."

"You are the head of the firm too, takes the lion's share, eh?"

"Scarcely. Though in our office the son of the elder brother has been regarded as the Head of the Firm, the division of profits is tolerably equal."

"The property has not gone with the title in part?"

"No."

"And you are doing a fine business?"

"As times go—yes——"

"And this place is your own?"

"Yes."

"Not mortgaged?"

"No."

"And your wife has her marriage settlement of £10,000?"

"She has."

"And you have only one child living, the boy I saw this afternoon?"

"Only one."

"Then how the deuce does it come that you are short of money?"

"I told you at our first interview I have been out-running the constable a little."

"A long way it seems to me."

"A long way, then, if——"

Whatever may have been going to follow Mr. Desborne's "if" was cut short by the entrance of coffee.

"I don't care for any, but I'll just take a cup," said Mr. Tovey, addressing his host, but looking hard at the maid who handed around the tray.

"Leave it on the side table," directed Mr. Desborne, and the maid withdrew.

"That is a pretty young woman," remarked Mr. Tovey.

"She is nice looking."

"What does your wife think of her?"

Mr. Desborne stared at the speaker, then replied, "I believe she thinks her nice-looking, too."

"Did she make this coffee?"

"I should say not; the cook, more probably."

"If I were coming here often, I should ask you to let me give your cook a lesson."

As there was nothing less likely than that Mr. Tovey would be frequently entreated to honor Ashwater with his presence, Mr. Desborne only asked:

"Do you not think it good, then?"

"Good! no; the English can't make coffee; they do not know how."

Mr. Desborne had tasted coffee made in France, and was vain enough to think that in his own house compared not unfavorably with it. His guests had likewise lauded the erring cook's skill, but it was of no use for him to state these facts. From Mr. Tovey's dictum there could be no appeal.

Than his judgment was no higher court. When a man possesses not only brains but money, and when no other man, unless he lacks brains or money, or both, ever seeks his help, it is small marvel that the owner of two such good things should grow to regard himself as omnipotent. Mr. Tovey at all events considered he was, after a fashion, omnipotent and well-nigh omniscient. He knew he could, to a certain extent, rule destinies, and he fancied he could also read hearts.

He believed he was reading Mr. Desborne's then, "Like an open book, sir," and laughed to himself as

he pushed aside his cup, as he had pushed aside his plate ; spilling some of the coffee on the cloth, as he had scattered some of the nut-shells.

"Oh ! beg pardon," he said, trying clumsily to remedy the mischief, by dabbing his *serviette* on the stain.

"Pray do not trouble yourself, it is of no consequence," exclaimed Mr. Desborne.

"I am afraid I must leave it to the laundress," confessed Mr. Tovey. "I am sorry to have been so careless, but the fact is I was thinking of something else," and thrusting his hand into the breast pocket of his coat, he produced a long blue envelope, out of which he extracted some business-like looking papers, that he proceeded to lay before him on the table.

Then came a light into Mr. Desborne's eyes, but the lines about his mouth did not relax. The tension of that long afternoon had told ; he was not sure, he felt afraid to hope.

"I like you," began Mr. Tovey, speaking with great deliberation ; "we both know why, and because I like you, I have brought what you want against my better judgment."

"Why, against ?"

"I will tell you presently," said the other, cutting across his question. "These are the bills drawn at three months, the period you named." This was interrogative, and Mr. Desborne answered——

"Yes !"

"I am charging you bank rate, and two per cent. commission," proceeded Mr. Tovey.

"Thank you."

"Do you exactly follow me ?"

"Perfectly."

"I do not think you do. In addition to the ordinary discount, I have charged the—for me—very moderate commission of eight per cent. per annum."

"I understand you clearly——"

"And I have drawn a cheque for the difference which

is dated to-morrow, the bills are likewise dated to-morrow, so every possible advantage is given to you."

"I am greatly obliged."

"I want no misconception about the matter. If you will do business with me, do it with your eyes open. Do not say hereafter you were drawn into this affair—that you were misled, hoodwinked."

"I shall say none of those things."

"Or think them?"

"Or think them."

"Very well, here are the bills. Be good enough to accept them. I see ink over there," and Mr. Tovey obligingly rose and, taking a stand from the sideboard, placed it on the table after folding back the cloth carefully, mindful of previous misadventures.

"Where am I to sign?" asked Mr. Desborne, holding the pen Mr. Tovey gave him above one of the slips of paper.

"Where? Good Lord, have you never accepted a bill before?"

"Never."

"Nor drawn one?"

"Never."

Mr. Tovey looked at so much innocence doubtfully for a moment, then drew in his breath with a low, curious noise. "I did not suppose there was a man in England could truthfully say as much," he remarked.

"Is the fact so extraordinary, then?"

"Extraordinary; I should think so! Now, let me show you," and he dashed off, "accepted payable."

"Where do you bank?"

"Oh! not at my bank, for Heaven's sake."

"Where then, your office?"

"No; worse and worse; must they be made payable somewhere?"

"Why, of course they must; you are a pretty sort of lawyer not to know that. Shall I say my bank?"

"If you please."

"Very well, then, just sign your name there, or,

rather, do not till I have said my say. Across that bill stamp, lies the direct road to ruin. The moment you write the words Edward Desborne you will have taken the first step along it."

"That is but a poor jest if you mean it for one."

"I do not mean it for a jest at all ; I am as serious as I ever was in my life. I know exactly what has happened in hundreds of similar cases, and what will happen in yours. You think now you will be able to meet those bills in three months and three days ; you won't. You believe now that date is a long way off. It is not ; the weeks will run by so fast that before you can clap hands you will find yourself counting the hours before your acceptances will be with the notary. Be advised, have nothing to do with me, or others like me, except in the way of buying and selling. Give me back my cheque, and throw those bills in the fire. If you do not, you will have begun to play a game with fortune, in which you are sure to lose. Come, let me be your friend indeed," and he took up the papers and made as though he would have torn them in two, when Mr. Desborne snatched them out of his hands.

"Prove yourself my friend indeed, by being my friend in need," he said, with a nervous laugh. "Do not be afraid ! I shall be prepared to meet my acceptances at the proper time. Where do I sign—here?" and hurriedly writing his good name on the three stamped slips, he blotted off and handed them to Mr. Tovey, who, letting the bills lie on the table before him, watched Mr. Desborne as he took possession of the cheque and glanced at it.

"You have crossed this," he said.

"Of course," answered Mr. Tovey.

"I should like an open one."

"Afraid to sully your banking account by passing my cheque through it?"

"No, but——"

"Yes," finished the other. "Here, give it to me,"

and having written "Pay cash" and initialled this mandate, he returned the document to Mr. Desborne and ended the transaction.

"It is about time I was getting back to the station, I think," he said, after a minute's silence.

"I will walk with you."

"Many thanks," and they sallied out together.

"You have a rich ward, have you not," asked Mr. Tovey as they walked along.

"Client," amended Mr. Desborne, not inquiring of whom he spoke.

"Then why did you not ask her for money ; five per cent. would have been a cheaper rate for you, and a higher than she is probably receiving."

"No, she gets five per cent."

"The deuce she does ; well you might have offered her six."

"Do you suppose I would ask a client and a girl to advance me money ?"

"I don't see why you should not, all being fair and above-board."

"Well, I couldn't, and if I were disposed to do a thing of the kind——"

"Your uncle might object."

"He would undoubtedly."

Mr. Tovey's cigar had gone out. He stopped, struck a match and lighted it again. When it was glowing red he spoke once more, this time as if in soliloquy.

"Profitable business, wealthy clients, unmortgaged property, wife with settlement, rich uncle, where does the money go ?"

"Did you speak to me ?"

"Yes ; where does the money go ?"

"I don't know," replied Mr. Desborne, inspired by some spirit of truth.

"But, my good sir, you ought to know. There is a leak in your ship, and if you don't find out where it is and stop it, not only your ship will founder but all

hands be lost. You set to work before it is too late. I have an interest in the ship now, so I must speak. Whatever the pleasant vice may be—dice, horses, women, cards, the Stock Exchange—get it within reasonable bounds, and keep it there, or commercially speaking, you are a dead man.”

“Before Heaven,” said Mr. Desborne, with passionate energy, “there is no vice. I do not gamble, or bet, or speculate. I have no separate establishment, and I am not extravagant.”

“Then once more I ask, where does the money go?”

Mr. Desborne was about to reply, when there came a wild rush, a shriek as of some lost spirit in despair, the grinding sound of a brake gripping the metals, and the London train steamed into Teddington Station.

The usual Sunday night contingent was on the platform taking leave of friends hurrying to secure places. “Take your seats; take your seats, please,” cried the porters. “Going on, sir?” asked the guard. “Smoking carriage? Yes, sir;” and Mr. Tovey was securely shut in and at liberty to devote all the power of his mind to the solution of that unanswered problem, “Where does the money go?”

“At all events I shall get mine,” he reflected, “and I told him the gospel truth. Yes, what I said was truth, if the devil spoke it!”

CHAPTER XVII.

WHERE THE MONEY WENT.

In the sad, cold twilight of a November morning, Mr. Desborne stood on the little landing stage, where Mr. Tovey had stood one night, looking at the Thames, swelled with recent rains, hurrying, hurrying away.

As he stood, he thought of many things, and none of them pleasant. It was not the hour, the season, or the place for happy reverie. The leafless trees, the sodden grass, the turbid water, the dull gray sky, unrelieved by even the reflection of a rising sun, composed a picture which could but be considered unique in its melancholy depression. All around, nature seemed sobbing like one broken-hearted—from every branch and twig, from every leaf of laurel and blade of grass, moist tears were falling. The long boughs of the weeping ash, the last survivor of four giants that had given the place its name, were dipping like whips into the river and troubling it.

There was not a sound of human life, not a plash of oars, or cry, or whistle; the very birds were still. Nothing broke the stillness save the flow and jut of the water, and even that seemed more mournful accompaniment to the song of silence than music made by itself.

It was indeed as sad a scene as can well be conceived, and one which formed an appropriate setting to Mr. Desborne's thoughts. He had slept badly; night had reminded him of much which day would enable him to forget, but the spell of darkness still lay heavy upon his heart, and he was wondering, while "weary and

full of care" he leaned over the water hurrying ever and ever onward to the sea, whether men have a right so to burden themselves, that when alone for a moment they can think of nothing save money—how to get it, how best to dole it out among the largest number of importunate persons, how to put off paying it, where to find more when the amount possessed—whether that amount be large or small—is spent.

He had been going through all these exercises the while slumber refused to close his tired eyelids, and risen at the first streak of dawn, hoping with movement to disperse the phantoms which had kept watch around his bed.

"A man has no right," he mentally decided, "so to swamp his life. He has but one to live; the day he loses now can never come again—the spring, when he feels too sick at heart to delight in the budding leaves and springing crocuses; the summer, in which all its wealth of beauty appeals to his senses in vain; the autumn, when the hanging fruit and glorious tints pass before his weary sight without refreshing it; the winter, when the white snow, the hanging icicles, the frost-bound earth, bring no kindly message from his lost boyhood, no gracious memory of his happy youth, he has sold himself into a worse than Egyptian bondage; but when a man has sold himself, when he has swamped his life, when he has bound himself to serve a god he hates, what is he to do? What am I to do?"

The hurrying river flowing swiftly gave no answer, the dripping trees only poured down their tears more abundantly, and his own heart sank low because it knew not how to offer advice of consolation.

"Where has the money gone? where does it go?" he repeated to himself, which was indeed a most pertinent question and one to which it behoved him to obtain an answer, because in the watches of the night he had parcelled out Mr. Tovey's cheque, but to find the whole sum was a drop in the ocean of his debts.

The remark that a man never feels himself so short

of money as immediately after he has received a large amount may sound paradoxical, but most struggling men know it to be absolutely true.

Ideal wealth is elastic, actual gold is confined within bounds and limits which cannot be passed.

A banking account is one of the least sympathetic facts in modern life. To ordinary customers it says, "Thus far shalt thou go and no further," and to this decision it adheres with admirable tenacity. Precisely the same result ensues when a person elects to keep his money in a stocking. If he put only twenty sovereigns in, no known secret of alchemy will enable him to take more than twenty sovereigns out, and it is this inexpansive peculiarity of the precious metals which renders absolute contact with them so unsatisfactory.

Those who wrote the fairy tales children old and young delight to read were aware of this idiosyncrasy, and got over the trouble by putting fancy into every casket, treasure-chest, and jewel-box. Thus the money never came to an end, and in like manner the wealth which is to be ours, but is not yet, seems inexhaustible and all powerful.

Till Mr. Desborne received the produce of those acceptances across which he had been solemnly warned lay the king's highway to ruin, he could have sworn the amount would clear him of difficulty, make existence pleasant as it once had been, and endow even the routine of business with a charm long unknown.

Now, after a night spent in mentally counting it over, he felt he had miscalculated. The goodly cheque, which on the previous evening seemed to warm his heart, chilled it because, in addition to the accounts that money so painfully raised he could not pay, he knew at the end of three months the sum itself would have to be refunded.

And till then and after then how was he to go on? It was easy to calculate the money likely to come in—the money which possibly would come in—but what

arithmetical learning could tell the amount that might have to flow out?

How had he got into such a corner? How was he to escape from it? With an impatient sigh Mr. Desborne turned his eyes from the water, swept the horizon with one comprehensive glance, gazed wistfully at the opposite bank, as though there lay the answer to his perplexity, after which, with a slight shiver, he left the riverside and walked slowly back to his house, pondering as he went the question Mr. Tovey had so plainly propounded.

"Where is the leak?" he said to himself taking out a small memorandum book and looking at some figures pencilled on one of the leaves, which proved conclusively where a great deal of the money went. "Can I stop that? No. All I can do is to try and make a larger income. I have been indolent, indifferent; I will see if I can't put affairs to rights, because it seems vain to expect help from any other source—unless"—but then he paused because of the thought which had come unbidden and made him hate himself.

"My uncle is right," he considered, trying to kill the horrid idea and bury it forever far from mortal ken; "I ought to stick more to business. That is my first duty, and I will fulfil it. My wife and child are more to me than mankind. I must make money faster if only to meet these bills. I will turn over a new leaf, not to-morrow, or the to-morrow after, but to-day," and involuntarily he quickened his pace as though he knew of some profitable matter waiting his return.

When he entered the dining-room, however, it was empty—not there might be hope to find the nuggets his soul craved for. The only gold-field available for him was the city where hundreds and thousands as clever and more persevering than he was struggling, fighting, for even a few grains of the precious dust.

It all came over him like a chill, cold wave that he had let his opportunity slip—that he had been too sure, too careless, too indolent. Not by such as he,

not by such fits and starts had the great Desborne business been made. The men who went before him had risen early, and late taken rest. West End drawing-rooms had seen little of them, and city offices much. They had considered solid success, not the vagaries of fashion. They had taken pleasure in their work and kept their money when they got it. They had gone in the morning to their day's employment with quiet minds, and returned home at evening with consciences at ease. They did not run into debt and lie awake o' nights thinking how they could stave off creditors, from what source the wherewithal to tide over some threatened crisis might be obtained.

He had done what that reverie at early dawn told him no man had a right to do, sold his future for no pleasure or comfort or profit, but only for loss and sorrow and misery. He had gone on and on, blindly believing that purchase money would never be paid, the harvest he had sown never be reaped, but now he could close his eyes to facts no longer: he might only be saved by a miracle, and that miracle must be wrought by himself.

Was he strong and brave enough for such a fight against circumstances and his own nature?

That remained to be seen, meanwhile as a beginning of the ceremony he intended to practise as he walked along the straight and disagreeable road, henceforth to be travelled, he emptied his pockets of all the money they contained excepting a few shillings, and thus impoverished, set out after breakfast for London.

Arrived at Waterloo, he modestly climbed to the top of an omnibus which set him down at the Stores in Queen Victoria Street, whence he pursued his way to Cloak Lane, taking no notice of any crossing sweeper and giving to no beggar as he went.

Quite a new experience for the kindly gentleman, but one which filled him with a dangerous feeling of virtue and self-denial.

As the day went on, his doubts vanished and he be-

gan to look more hopefully on his position. He did not go out until nearly two o'clock.

He was happily in his office when a new client called, who brought some good business. He summoned up sufficient resolution to absent himself from a meeting where measures were to be discussed for sending relief to the distressed inhabitants of a very distant country. He dismissed a gentleman who called to solicit alms for some deserving protégé with a trifling contribution ; he declined to see several strangers who refused to send in their names or state their business ; he even proved inaccessible to a "sister" whose pleadings he knew he could not withstand if he allowed her to appear before him and conduct her own case. Altogether it may safely be said he had never mortified himself and others so much in the course of any previous morning, and when he went out to cash Mr. Tovey's cheque it was with the firm conviction that if the signs of being on the right path are rough stones, sharp thorns, and everything disagreeable that can be imagined, he was at last surely travelling in a safe direction.

He took train at the Mansion House Station for St. James's Park, whence he walked across a bit of fashionable country to Mr. Tovey's bank.

"How will you take it?" asked the cashier, when Mr. Desborne presented that gentleman's cheque.

No unpleasant "referring back," or hesitating, or looking twice at the simple slip of paper, or going through any one of the forms which proves too surely that a customer's account is either insignificant or doubtful.

Nothing doubtful about Mr. Tovey's lordly order to pay Edward Desborne, Esq., who answered "Short" in a tone that showed he had been accustomed to receive the proceeds of many large cheques, even though unaware of the legitimate manner in which to accept a bill.

It occupied a couple of minutes to enter the notes ;

then they were pushed across the counter to Mr. Desborne, who, after counting, placed them in his pocket-book and said, "Thank you ; good afternoon," and departed.

Just as he left the bank a particularly wretched-looking woman asked him for alms in God's name.

In a moment all Mr. Desborne's resolutions were swept away. Should he, who had been helped, it seemed to him then, almost miraculously, refuse to help another? Should he, who was going to turn over a new leaf and try to make such a good thing of life, remain deaf to an appeal which might mean the turning over, instead of leaving unturned, of a new leaf in the experience of some one else. No, he could not. He felt as many a woman feels when leaving a confectioner's shop she sees a group of poor children flattening their noses against the window, only more surely, that he who has received ought to distribute.

It was a joy to be satisfied once again that charity might be deemed not merely a harmless gratification, but an absolute duty.

It was not his part to decide whether the suppliant had been worn to a skeleton by disease or dissipation ; whether those deep lines across her forehead were graven by trouble or remorse ; whether all color had been taken from her cheeks by long vigils or gin.

Hers was the blame if she asked unworthily. His would be the blame if he condemned, knowing nothing of her past, and therefore ere he turned away, she was the richer and he the poorer by two and sixpence.

Not a matter of much consequence, perhaps, save for this—that barriers are easily broken down, and no known method of division can extract more than eight half crowns out of a sovereign.

Directly Mr. Desborne parted from the woman, he bethought him it was unwise to walk through the streets with such a sum of money about his person, and the usual result followed.

If his former small extravagance had donned the

mask of charity, this expenditure assumed with equal ease that of prudence. Another man in his position, if wise, would have buttoned up his coat and returned by the way he came, to St. James's Park Station. Not so Mr. Desborne, to hail a hansom, jump into it, saying Royal Exchange, and to be off as fast as a good horse could go, seemed to him the natural way to save both time and money.

When he reached the city he did not pay the driver his strict fare, that had never been Mr. Desborne's way. Excuses for liberality were always easy to find. Either the weather was hot or cold, or the horse good or worn out, or the man cheerful-looking or miserable—no matter what the state of man, horse, or weather, Mr. Desborne was sure to find some reason why his purse should pay tribute.

He told Mr. Tovey the simple truth; he had no personal vice, as the world and religion account vice. Further, he had no personal extravagance. He ate and drank and dressed plainly; yet money sifted through his fingers like sand.

He could deny himself, but he could not deny others; and it was for this reason probably that some persons thought him prodigal.

For this reason, certainly he was prodigal, and when, after paying the cabman and banking the proceeds of Mr. Tovey's cheque, he found himself walking down Abchurch Lane, this conviction pressed home. He began to feel doubtful about many things, and to consider that he must keep a stricter watch over his expenditure than ever, limiting the silver in his pocket to a certain sum per diem could maintain.

He would not be profuse, he would not even be ordinarily liberal till times improved and things were very different. Yet, such a case as that of the poor woman—what could he do? How could he stand coolly by and see the horse starve while the grass, his grass, was growing?

He could not do it, but he could do other things.

He could devote himself more to business and make a larger income and refrain from subscribing to every charity, and be most economical, and spend the days to come as he had spent that day, in a manner as exemplary, as disagreeable.

When he entered his office he found Mr. Thomas Desborne writing busily.

"I do wish, Edward," said that gentleman, suspending his employment for a moment, "when you intend to absent yourself for hours, you would mention the fact. We have not such an enormous number of clients we can afford to offend any of them."

Now, this speech seemed hard to Mr. Edward Desborne, whether addressed to him in his true capacity as Head of the Firm, or in his new character of Repentant Prodigal. He had that morning refrained from indiscriminate lounging, he had remained at his post till nearly two o'clock, not even going out for luncheon, he had hurried to the West End, and driven back rapidly to the city, he had not stopped to talk with anyone, but hastened from his bank to Cloak Lane only to be received with a rebuke. Verily, the straight and narrow business path was not a pleasant one! At that moment he felt it was very much the reverse.

But he had a sweet temper. It was not his way at any time to return that sharp answer which breeds strife, and he was not going to answer sharply now and so spoil all his good resolutions with a bad deed. He loved his uncle, and he owed him much, more than he could ever repay, and that afternoon there seemed a heavier debt on his conscience than usual, caused, perhaps, by something Mr. Tovey had said, and that he knew he himself had thought, for all of which reasons he replied, without any trace of irritation in voice or manner:

"I will tell you for the future. I am very sorry I never thought of doing so to-day. Have you been wanting me?"

"Mr. Gallett has. He came directly after you went

out, and left word he would call again. He did call again about half an hour ago, and when he heard you had not returned went away in a towering rage."

"You did not see him then?"

"No, unfortunately, I have only just returned from my appointment in Garden Court. Knevitt also was out, no one was in fact in except Tripsdale."

"I wonder what Gallett wanted?"

"Perhaps something, perhaps nothing, but whether or no, I am sorry this matter should have happened, because he has influence."

"He has, and will exert it according to the temper he is in. I did not go out till two o'clock. I have not even had any luncheon, was too busy to think of any. I will send Gallett a note; no, I will go round and see him, that is the best thing to do," and before his uncle could say "yes" or "no" Mr. Edward Desborne had departed. The junior partner felt somewhat disconcerted. His ideas had been shaped after good old-fashioned patterns, in vogue at the time when Desbornes' house had the field comparatively to itself, when there was no "going to and fro upon this earth," at least in business hours, in the city, when Desbornes' had many clients and many partners to see those clients, and when one of those partners would as soon have thought of dancing on the tight rope as of running round to the warehouse of a man perfectly well able to walk to Messrs. Desbornes' office, and consult any member of the then firm, who might, in a dignified way, chance to be at leisure, and willing to grant him an interview.

Desbornes' in truth had once upon a time carried matters with a very high hand, and the spirit and the fragrance of that long-ago past still animated and hung around one at least of the partners, who, though he wished by all honorable means to attract and retain fresh business, did not like the notion of any member of the firm being at the beck of Dick, Tom, and Harry, and running like a lackey through the city after them.

Before he had settled the question satisfactorily, his nephew was back again looking handsome and pleasant enough to gladden any uncle's heart. When Edward Desborne once took a matter in hand he never let the grass grow under his feet. That, at least, could be said about him; the trouble was, however, to get a matter taken up. If he could hand it over to his uncle, or Mr. Knevitt, or Mr. Puckle, he was only too ready to do so, and Mr. Thomas Desborne, as he lifted his eyes to that clever eager face all aglow with excitement, felt ready to forgive any lack of dignity for the sake of such unwonted attention to business.

"Did you see him?" asked the elder man, meaning Mr. Gallett.

"Yes, I was in the very nick of time, found him in the deuce of a temper locking up his safe and preparing to go home. The clerk, it was plain to see, did not want to admit me, but I walked past him, and in two minutes all was right."

"What did he want?"

"His son-in-law is going to turn his concern into a limited liability company, and he wished to know if we would act as solicitors."

"Oh! and you?"

"I said that though we did not care for that sort of thing as a rule, we felt so satisfied concerning Mr. Evelington, his grease, and his father-in-law, we would go into the affair with pleasure."

"You did not word your acquiescence to him precisely as you have done to me, I conclude."

"Of course not. I went into the matter with so much gravity of manner and in such a spirit of sympathy that I gathered this Evelington Company, Limited, is intended to be but the forerunner of changes mightier still. Gallett's Soap Works will soon, if I mistake not, be transformed into Gallett, Limited—quite a private affair, all shares being taken up by the family."

"This is indeed a transformation scene," commented Mr. Thomas Desborne. "I wonder what it means."

"It means," returned his nephew, gayly, "that, as Mr. Gallett himself observes, times are changed, sir, and we must change with them. Our grandfather marched to one tune, but we must march to another, if we would not be left hopelessly behind."

"Did Gallett say that?"

"He did, indeed. I have neither added to nor taken from what he evidently considered his very original remark. He was in an exceedingly talkative mood, and if he had not been hurrying to meet Evelington I might have heard much more. As it was I learnt he has it in his mind to sell that nice old place of his—the house and grounds for an asylum and the land for building."

"Dear me!" sighed Mr. Thomas Desborne. "That place has belonged to the Gallett family for over a century."

"So the old sinner told me. He was affected about the matter almost to tears, but then he had been lunching with Evelington."

"And to think of turning his business into a company! It is as bad almost as hearing of Desbornes', Limited!"

In his heart Mr. Edward Desborne felt that would be rather a good hearing if money were likely to come out of it, but he only said:

"Lawyers have not got to such a pass yet, and I do not suppose they will in our time."

"I earnestly trust not. Still, things are changing so fast there is no telling what may happen. Mr. Gallett is quite right when he says we are marching to a different tune from that our ancestors kept step to. To my mind, the old tune was the best, however."

"It was the best, anyhow," agreed the Head of the Firm, thinking of those prosperous days when a partner in Desbornes' was considered a sort of Cræsus.

"Come upstairs, Ned, and have a cup of tea," sug-

gested Mr. Thomas Desborne, laying his hand affectionately on the younger man's shoulder. "It is a bad thing to fast so long. Why did you not go out and have some luncheon?"

"I was too busy for one thing, and for another I felt in a working humor, and knew if I went to my usual place I should meet somebody who would detain me."

"But surely you need not have gone to your usual place?"

"No, but wherever I go I am sure to meet some person I do not want to meet."

"What sort of person?"

"Oh, the man who asks one for a subscription, or to get up a subscription, or to take up a case, or give a letter for an hospital, or interest one's self about an orphan lad, or a widow, or a deaf-mute."

"Poor Ned."

"Well, I need not tell you, uncle, I like to give, and I am willing to help, but giving takes money and helping takes time."

"Undoubtedly; but since when, may I ask, have your eyes been opened to these facts?"

"Since yesterday, I believe; at all events, I had a long think this morning over the question, and I made up my mind to follow your advice and stick better to business."

"I am very glad to hear you say so."

"Yes, and I mean to stick to business. I want to make money—a lot of money."

"You are not singular in that desire."

"Hitherto I have not taken the best means to compass it, though."

"You have not; it is never too late to mend, however."

Mr. Edward Desborne remained silent. If he had entertained any hope that his uncle would ask why he wanted money so badly, and, as on many previous occasions, suggest presenting him with a cheque, he was

doomed to disappointment. Mr. Thomas Desborne was a careful and by no means impulsive man, and it was not in his mind to present any more cheques to any one, unless he saw that very good results were likely to come about from doing so.

"It takes such a lot of money to get on nowadays," resumed his nephew, after a pause.

"So I am told—often," answered Mr. Thomas Desborne, drily, and there ensued another short silence, which was employed by the senior partner in looking out of the window, and broken by the appearance of tea.

"Will you have a chop, Ned?" asked Mr. Thomas Desborne.

"No, thank you," answered his nephew, absently, still letting his eyes wander over the beauties of Cloak Lane. "I am sure you are right," he went on suddenly, "the world went on better when men lived with their business."

"They can't live with their business now," was the quiet reply.

"But you——"

"I am the exception which proves the rule. If I had a wife and family I could not live here. If I had a wife and family how could I afford the rent of any house in the city, where it would be possible to lodge a wife and family?"

"Still you have always maintained that it is not well for a man to live very far from his business," persisted the other.

"I always will maintain—you have no cream, Ned—I always will maintain it is not well for a man to live where he may be tempted to forget the fact that he has a business. If he will only keep that fact in his mind and remember he must attend to his business in order to maintain himself and family, I do not believe it matters much where he lives."

"I see."

"The mischief nowadays is that business men not

merely are tempted to forget their business but the debt of gratitude they owe to business, but they wish to forget—they are ashamed to acknowledge—they make their money in trade. In the young folks' slang they try to cut the shop, and, as a natural consequence, the shop frequently cuts them. It was different once upon a time. A merchant was proud of being a merchant, a shopkeeper of his well-filled shop, a ship-owner of his fleet of vessels, a goldsmith of his stock of magnificent goods, a solicitor——”

“Yes, uncle. A solicitor?”

“Of his knowledge of law, the number of his clients, his standing, the good opinion in which his fellow-citizens held him, the honorable position he filled, the posts to which he might aspire, these were all legitimate subjects for pride, laudable objects of ambition, much more legitimate and laudable than——”

“Will you not finish your sentence?”

“I think not, Ned; the theme ran away with me or I might never have said so much.”

“I am glad you did. I know pretty well what you were going to add, and can find the sentence for myself.”

“Have another cup of tea?”

“Thank you, I will. I never get such good tea anywhere else.”

“You never get good tea made so well anywhere else. Is not that it rather?”

“Perhaps it may be.”

“I am giving Miss Fermoy a series of lessons in tea-making, so that when she marries her husband may find he has wedded a past-mistress in the art.”

“Do you think she will marry?”

“I hope so. One day, and—well.”

“Does she see much of young Vernham?”

“She sees nothing.”

“No?”

“The offer she made him put an effectual stop to the familiar intimacy of old.”

"What offer?"

"Of half her fortune."

"You do not mean that."

"That is precisely what I do mean."

"Did Miss Fermoy tell you?"

"No, but Vernham did."

"He refused?"

"Of course."

"But why should such a suggestion have changed their former attitude? She did not propose that she should go with the money, I conclude."

"Nothing was farther from her thoughts. He showed me her letter, and a simpler, more innocent, more womanly letter I never read."

"Half her fortune, only think of such a thing!"

"Yes, only think of it."

"Still, I cannot understand why so generous an offer should alienate two old friends, for they were old and good friends though not of the same rank."

"I can understand. The mere fact of making such an offer raised her; the mere fact of receiving such an offer pulled him down a little—in his own estimation."

"You think that is the light in which he regards the affair?"

"I am very certain that is the precise light in which he regards it."

"Oh!"

"You see how utterly hopeless it would be to try to make up a match between them."

"Yet she is wonderfully improved—in manner and speech I mean."

"By this time next year we shall see a greater improvement still; but, whatever improvement there may be, she will always remain to Mr. Vernham Timothy Fermoy's daughter, the girl who sold vegetables in a lean-to shed at Battersea."

"It is a pity."

"But natural; indeed, I confess I consider the young man's mental attitude not merely natural but,

after a fashion, worthy of praise. You see, money has placed the girl in his estimation on no higher a platform than she occupied before."

"That is true; still I feel sorry she has lost a friend."

"She has not lost a friend. Were she poor or in trouble to-morrow the old relations between them would be re-established. There now, have I not given you something to think about?"

"You have, indeed. Half her fortune! Yet it is just what we might have expected."

"From such a girl—yes."

Mr. Edward Desborne sipped his tea, which had grown quite cold, reflectively. Mr. Thomas Desborne crossed his legs and assumed a meditative attitude. Outside the November twilight was being slowly but surely chased by the shadows of coming night. Inside the fire burnt with sufficient brightness to make the room cheerful and homelike; the clock on the mantelpiece ticked drowsily. Everything was so quiet the two men might have been shipwrecked mariners cast on a desert island, and the muffled roar of London traffic, which made itself heard even where they sat, the monotonous sound of the sea washing over a level and sandy beach.

"Ned." It was Mr. Thomas Desborne who broke the spell of silence.

"Yes, uncle."

"I want to do something."

"Then why do you not do it?" asked his nephew in surprise.

"I should not like to take a step of the sort without your consent."

Just for a moment it seemed to Mr. Edward Desborne that his heart stood still. Were the gods in very truth deriding him; had Fate chosen him for her sport then? "What is it?" he said, in a voice which seemed strange to him by reason of the blood rushing to his head, which seemed half to deafen him. "Are you contemplating marriage—or murder?"

"Marriage is not for me," answered the elder man, "and I have no desire to murder anyone; but I should like, if you have no objection, to engage another clerk."

Mr. Edward Desborne felt in no mirthful mood, yet he broke into a laugh. It was the laugh of reaction, not of merriment, and seemed so uncalled for and sounded so strange that his uncle could but look amazed at so surprising a reception of his not very extraordinary remark.

"What is amusing you, Ned?" he inquired.

"I beg your pardon," answered Ned, "but it is such an anti-climax. Who could have supposed so portentous a beginning was to end only in a clerk!"

His uncle made a gesture of impatience. "Do you object to engaging another?"

"Object! my dear uncle, why should I object? Do I ever object to anything you propose? Have another clerk, or a dozen if you see fit, for that matter, only——"

"Only what?"

"Do you think work enough can be found to occupy him?"

"I think work enough ought to be found."

"Then have him by all means, whoever he may be."

"Ned, Ned, I am speaking quite seriously."

"And so am I. The only part of the business I fail to grasp is how we are to find work for another clerk, unless we can set him, like a gentleman of very doubtful character, to spin ropes of the sea-sand."

"Adam Smith says," observed Mr. Desborne, taking no notice of this suggestion, "A man grows rich by employing a quantity of manufacturers, that is, artisans or clerks; he grows poor by maintaining a multitude of menial servants. . . . His services (that is, the services of the menial servant) generally perish in the very instant of their performance and seldom leave any trace or value behind them, for which an equal quantity of service could afterwards be procured."

Now, I want you to lay the statement to heart ; for we have been economizing in our manufactory—Cloak Lane—in order to spend in York Terrace and at Ash-water.”

“Do you think I have been spending unduly, then ?”

“I make no accusation, Ned. All I want to point out is that in our case, where the largest outlay ought to be the smallest expenditure is found. We have been pursuing a wrong system, and I want, if possible, to begin on a right one ; therefore, as poor old Binning is now adrift, I will, with your permission, take him on here and see whether it be not possible to nurse this business once strong enough into a better state of health.”

“And I will help you, uncle, with heart and soul. I feel ashamed of myself. I vowed this morning that I would devote more time, more care, more thought to business, and I intend to keep that promise. You shall not have to reproach me with negligence again.”

The head of the firm spoke in a tone of eager conviction, but Mr. Thomas Desborne did not receive these assurances of amendment with any great enthusiasm. As a rule, outsiders do receive such assurances with a sort of modified belief and restrained pleasure which is the reverse of gratifying. Men's expressed resolves and avowed intentions rarely strike the same chord in other breasts such resolves and avowed intentions awake in their own. The music of performance is that which friends and relatives value, perhaps unduly, and inclined though he might be to hope, the wild strains Mr. Edward Desborne occasionally evoked out of the many excellent things he meant to do often failed to produce any effect, save that of sadness on his uncle's calm and well-balanced mind.

“If you continue to devote yourself to business, Ned, as you have done to-day, we shall soon retrieve the past,” he said, trying to speak cheerily, for he did not wish to undervalue any effort in the way of improvement. “I have never thought our position

hopeless ; a little common-sense and a little application are all we want to enable us to hold our own. In the face of so much opposition we cannot expect perhaps to regain altogether our old standing, but if we choose we may yet do very well—very well indeed.”

“And we will,” finished his nephew, rising, “I must be off now, though I wish I could stay for hours, it is so pleasant here, but there are some things I must attend to at Teddington.”

“In that case I will try not to keep you,” said the elder man, a little wearily. “Good-by for the present, and God bless you.”

“God bless you, uncle,” returned Mr. Edward Desborne, with fervor, in spite of the load of care pressing him into the earth, in spite of the ugly thoughts which would now and then crop up in his mind. He did love his best earthly friend most tenderly, and when he plunged from Cloak Lane into the deeper gloom of St. Thomas the Apostle, he heaved a deep sigh because he could not confide his troubles to the only man he believed could rid him of them.

“I must get out of the mess as best I can,” he thought, and full of this resolve he devoted himself after dinner to the pressing question of his liabilities and the sum he had to pay them.

Making a list of his debts, he decided, “I will send a cheque for so much to this man, and another for so much to that. A can wait a little, and so must B ; that account ought to be cleared off ; and in this way he was plodding through a mass of bills, when, catching sight of a letter directed in Miss Simpson’s old-fashioned, lady-like hand, he thought he would rest himself by reading what she had to say.

As it turned out, she had nothing to say ; the envelope merely contained some enclosures which fell to the carpet. Mr. Desborne picked them up and even while he did so a foreboding of evil made him turn cold.

They were all from duns, and referred to debts he had never so much as heard of till that moment.

With a fainting heart he laid them flat on the blotting pad and looked at the sums stated to be owing, while the room seemed whirling round and whirling him with it.

Pierre et Cie, court dressmakers ; Madame Sophie, a fashionable milliner ; Highton, florist by appointment, &c., &c.; the more homely, but not much cheaper Budge, job-master, who supplied closed and open carriages, victorias, broughams, and various other vehicles by the hour, day, or month, on "reasonable terms."

All this Mr. Desborne's weary eyes took in. Only four accounts accompanied by a pressing request for settlement from each creditor—only four bills—yet the sum total represented an amount nearly equal to that received by him earlier in the day across the counter of Mr. Tovey's bank.

"Where does the money go?" that gentleman had asked, and Mr. Desborne answered "he did not know."

He knew now, however, for it was to Messrs. Pierre et Cie, Madame Sophie, and Messrs. Highton & Budge, butcher, baker, candlestick maker, exiles in Siberia, cannibals in Africa, starving Hindoos and ejected Indians, to say nothing of English widows and orphans, English blind, deaf, lame, diseased, the money went !

CHAPTER XVIII.

MR. PLASHET IS SURPRISED.

Even Mr. Tripsdale's self-esteem was unable to blind him to the fact that his visit to Battersea had not proved a triumphant success. Indeed, as the 'bus he honored by patronizing pursued its slow but sure way toward Blackfriars, he was fain to admit his forced march from Field Prospect Road and abandonment of the stores and munitions of war to the enemy were painfully like a defeat.

"Hang it ! what was I to do ?" he said, when fighting his battle over again after tea while seated by the firelight which stole tenderly over Gussy's pale face, and played a ghostly game of hide-and-seek with shadows lurking in the dim corners and flitting noiselessly across the ceiling. "I could of course have knocked the fellow into a cocked hat."

Mr. Tripsdale was to Thomas Connollan as David unto Goliath, but then to be sure David won the day in his encounter. "Still a row might have ended in the police court, and that was a thing not to be risked. Any shindy of the sort would play the deuce with me in Cloak Lane, and as for Miss Fermoy's name being mixed up in a quarrel with such a lot as the Field Prospect gang, it is not to be thought of."

"You were wise not to fight," replied his brother, looking straight into the burning coals and thinking perhaps that Miss Fermoy ought to be spared for the future all trouble and vexation, perhaps that the rôle of David was not one to be rashly assumed in modern times and by lawyers' clerks.

He had no doubt of Reginald's courage—indeed, he knew him to be pugnacious as a bantam cock ; nevertheless, discretion is more often than not the better part of valor, and a brawl with their client's connections would certainly not recommend itself to the Messrs. Desborne.

"But you see that beggar got clear off with the five-pound note," said Reginald.

"Yes, and you did not get the receipt."

"I was in ten minds to go after him to the pub. and warn the proprietor not to let him have change."

"It is far better that you did not."

"I think so myself, still the question now arises, What ought I to do ?"

"Get the receipt."

"All very fine, but if you saw the woman you'd know that to get anything from her was easier said than done, besides I have not the time. I can't be dancing up and down to Battersea every ten minutes of the day. No, the best course will be to lay the state of the case before Miss Fermoy and take her instructions."

"I would do nothing of the kind. She has had bother enough," said the pale young fellow, who was chivalrous as any knight of the round table.

"I'll be sworn she has, but what other plan can I adopt ?"

"Will you let me try if I can produce any impression on this terrible Mrs. Fermoy ?"

"You, Gus, why she'd eat you up, body and bones," said Reginald, in the compassionate tone a tender giant might employ if speaking to a small, fragile child.

"I don't think she would ; at all events, let me go and see what luck I have. If you remember, in the old fairy tales, it was always some hop o' my thumb who got the best of ogres and wicked witches and the like, and I fancy I might so talk to Mrs. Fermoy that she could be induced to act reasonably."

"Could you induce a wild bull to listen to reason ?

No, Gus, you must not go near that dreadful woman, I should hate you to see her, even. If she—I mean, if she was in the same mood she was in this evening——” broke off Mr. Tripsdale with a sort of gulp leaving his intended sentences unfinished.

“I know what you were going to say, Reggy,” answered his brother, taking Reginald’s hand and pressing it affectionately. “You think Mrs. Fermoy might call me a cripple and a hunchback and that I should feel hurt, but you are mistaken. There was a time when any boy in the street had power to vex me, when I thought if I could only find some place to hide myself I should be happy; but that is all gone and past. If I had made myself what I am, perhaps I might feel differently, but——”

“Oh! don’t go on, Gus; I can’t bear it—I can’t, I can’t.”

“Not bear to hear I am happy, old fellow; well, that is queer, too.”

“I like to hear you are happy, but when I think of what you and I are—you so good and gentle and I such a firebrand, and then consider I never met with any accident, but was left to grow tall and straight, while you, who might have been taller and straighter—no, it breaks my heart. Gus, do you believe me—if I could take your burden to-night I would bear it cheerfully, thankfully—I would.”

“I know that, and far better than I have ever done. Who has carried all the heaviest part of our trouble? You. Who went out in the heat and the snow that I might sit by the fire or keep cool in the shade; who stinted himself in food to provide better fare for me, over which I often felt I should choke? You. Who tried to keep all care from me, who, if he could have helped it, would not have let even the winds of heaven blow on me? You. Whose has preached silent sermons to me every day? You. Whose love and patience and tenderness, greater than any woman’s, have turned any misfortune into a blessing for me? You—you—

you. Don't try to speak, Reggy, for I know you can't without making a baby of yourself and me."

Reginald Tripsdale did not speak, but he choked back something suspiciously like a sob, while his brother stroked the hand he held and sat thinking his own thoughts, which were not all pain, for if the story of their lives so far had been somewhat sad, it was full of beauty too, the beauty of self-reliance and self-denial, of resolute struggle, and beyond all—love.

"You will not refuse to give me pleasure," went on Augustus; "you will let me go up to Battersea and fight this terrible dragon. I won't chaff her as you did. Some people don't understand chaff, but I will explain matters to her, and I should like, I cannot tell you how much, to do something for Miss Fermoy, for I am sure she is good."

"She is," agreed Reginald Tripsdale, audibly, adding to himself that surprising proof of goodness, "She held her tongue."

"If you have a fancy to go giant-killing," he added, "by all means take a run up to Battersea on Monday, but don't blame me should you get the worst of the encounter. Now, shall we turn out for a stroll and try what Hoxton has to show us to-night."

"Yes, we have not been up there for some time," answered Gus, with alacrity, for he understood his brother wanted to walk off the effects of their talk, and believed the naphtha lights, the cheap jacks, and other allurements of Hoxton were delightful antidotes to bad spirits, which indeed, was an article of faith with himself. On how many nights, in what seemed to their youth, in the far long ago, had they not—anxious, cold, often hungry—sallied forth to one of those free entertainments and found in the show distraction from their cares, light, warmth, and food for thought. In their time they had patronized Portobello in the remote west, and Stratford in the far east, Lambeth Walk in the south, and Pitfield Street in the north, with many less important thoroughfares thrown in as make-weight.

Wherever costermongers congregated and open-air meetings were held for the transaction of business or pleasure, or both, those lads had in their earlier days repaired at least on one night in the week, and as each district in London has its own particular humor and character, the Tripsdales could have claimed an almost exhaustive acquaintance with the peculiarities of every informal gathering in the way of an evening market round and about the metropolis.

On the occasion of that especial stroll, however, the elder brother noticed that Reginald took his amusement sadly. He was not so quick as usual to catch the fun of the fair or so ready to laugh at it. The patter of no medicine vender could provoke a smile, while he regarded the most impudent Cheap Jack with a scornful expression of broad disdain. "The first individual," he remarked, was "not a patch on the fellow at Stratford Bridge, while the man Gus must remember selling little paraffin lamps in Lambeth Walk could but be considered worth a dozen of that donkey who was unable to palm off his wretched old umbrellas as new from the manufacturer."

"We had better have a run down to Kingston," he said at last. "There is always diversion to be had there on a Saturday night."

"If we go on to Dalston we can pick up something cheap for supper," suggested Augustus, meeting the difficulty in a practical manner.

"Ay, let us go to Dalston. We can stroll along Kingsland Road home," agreed his brother with an air of gloomy resignation.

"He does not relish being beaten," thought Gus, which was indeed the precise cause of Mr. Reginald Tripsdale's dissatisfaction. Then and there, had circumstances permitted, he would have liked to return to Battersea and demand—if needful at the sword's point, figuratively speaking—Mrs. Fermoy's receipt or Miss Fermoy's five-pound note.

As this could not be, however, after they had made

their purchases in Dalston, he suddenly remembered what a dead-and-alive place Kingsland Road was. "Why, the Commercial Road is liveliness itself by comparison," and proposed they should take rail to Shore-ditch.

"Tell you what it is, Reggy," said his brother; "you want a good supper—half a pint of bitter and a pipe to bring you to your better self."

"Perhaps I do," answered the malcontent. "I want something, at any rate, to take the taste of that old woman out of my mouth."

With a brave heart Augustus Tripsdale set out on Monday morning to face the foe. He walked with his brother to the bottom of Wallbrook, when the two parted company, one bending his steps office-wards, the other taking the shortest cut to old Swan Pier.

"After all," remarked Reginald, "there is nothing to beat the boat. By the time you have walked across Southwark or Blackfriars Bridge and waited for a 'bus, you'd be nearly at Lambeth, and the same if you try the train. The boat is far and away the best and quickest travelling, and the cheapest too." In consequence of which reasoning, Augustus Tripsdale, who at first inclined to take train at Cannon Street for Waterloo and again at Waterloo at Clapham Junction, hurried across Upper Thames Street and reached the landing stage just as a boat was about to cast off.

"Come along," said the man at the gangway, and the young fellow stepped aboard with that sense of exhilaration which seems so unreasonable, yet is so universal, that ensues when people manage to catch a train, or not to miss a train, by what Mr. Reginald Tripsdale called "the skin of the teeth."

With the pleasant glow of having somehow done a clever thing, Augustus selected a seat and gave himself up to the happiness of a fine September morning on the river. In the air there was the keen crisp freshness, not merely of autumn but of the early day. London looked its best and brightest, the tide was with

them, and barges laden with hay were going up stream joyously, and making charming touches of color, and pictures on which one passenger, at all events, could feast his eyes. Past Somerset House and Adelphi Terrace ; past the Embankment Gardens and the Houses of Parliament ; past old Lambeth with the Archbishop's Palace, and St. Mary's Church ; past Chelsea and across to Battersea Park ; a delightful trip thought the young man as he walked ashore and bent his steps in the direction of Field Prospect Road.

Battersea seemed to him very quiet ; as well it might, for the place was on its best behavior. There are some suburbs who do not wash on Monday. Battersea is one of them. It is a neighborhood which requires a good deal of rest after the fatigue of Sunday, when dinners have to be cooked, toilets made, visits received and visits paid, when if people do not go to Church they tire themselves in other ways, when they spend a considerable amount of money, and after many hours devoted to the rites of hospitality, retire to bed only to awake the next morning with a dull sense of depression and a feeling of lively resentment that another hard week has come, which must be faced and fought through somehow.

The children were at school, and most of the men, driven by what they considered a cruel necessity, had gone to work. Those who were in a position to keep Saint Monday holy were worshipping, each in his favorite public-house, though a few women with arms akimbo, or hands and wrists wrapped up in their aprons, were gossiping at their doors. As a rule the female population was engaged in that, to masculine understandings, mysterious and unsatisfactory business "clearing up."

Mrs. Fermoy was "clearing up." Being a lady who, as she boasted, never did anything by halves, she had risen early and literally turned the house out of doors. Mrs. Perkyn's rooms formed the principal basis of her operations, and after having black-leaded and broomed

and scrubbed like a "heathen-nigger," she was engaged when Augustus Tripsdale knocked at her door in cleaning the right-hand window on the ground floor, with which any one who watched the vigor of her attack might have supposed she had a life-long feud.

"Now, then, what may you want, young man?" she asked, pausing in her occupation and addressing the "young man" from a temporary seat on the sill.

"Is Mrs. Fermoy in?"

"Indeed she is. I am Mrs. Fermoy, worse luck."

The visitor thought it was very bad luck indeed. He had been prepared for a good deal, but an irate individual who snapped him up without the smallest provocation, who turned a face smeared with black-lead toward him, who had tied her head up in an old checked duster, who never moved from her perch on the sill, who banged the glass as if it were a dusty mat, was an adversary beyond his worst expectation. He did not lose courage, however. If he said what he had to say civilly he might soothe even this savage beast.

"I am sorry to come just when you are so busy," he began.

"I don't know when you could come that I wasn't busy," she answered, with a short laugh. "When there's only one pair of hands to do the work of a house like this some one must be busy."

"That is very true," said young Tripsdale, weakly.

"It is so true that I'll thank you to mention your business and take yourself off. I have something else to do than waste my time on canvassers and such like. If you want to sell I don't want to buy, and that is flat."

"I am not a canvasser, and I do not want you to buy anything. I have only called to ask you to be kind enough to give me the receipt a person left for you to sign on Saturday evening last."

"What receipt? what person?"

"The person who brought you five pounds from Miss Fermoy, for which he ought to have taken a receipt at the time."

"And why didn't he?"

"Because you would not give it to him."

"And I am not going to give it you. If Miss Fermoy," with withering sarcasm, "wants a receipt she may come for it herself. How do I know who that impudent jackanapes with as much brass about him as an Old Bailey lawyer who bounced down here on Saturday was, or who you are either, for the matter of that?"

"You know he brought you a five-pound note, at all events."

"I know nothing of the kind. He made such a to-do about the receipt and put my head in such a whirl, it may have been anything. Anyhow, I had no good of the money, if it was money. My son whisked it out of my sight, and, as if that was not enough, you must now come when I am worried out of my senses asking for a receipt, indeed."

"I am obliged to ask for a receipt."

"What! for money I never had? That is a good one, too," and Mrs. Fermoy was so much amused she felt constrained to take up her wet cloth and dab the window all over in a severe and uncompromising manner.

"I suppose the money did not go out of the family, however," persisted the young fellow.

"Whether it did or not is none of your business."

"It is my business, and I mean to make it mine. My brother has to send the receipt to Miss Fermoy, and I have come a long way this morning to get it for him."

"Oh! he's your brother is he? Well, I might have guessed that, for he's not much to look at any more than yourself."

"Will you kindly give me the receipt, Mrs. Fermoy, and let me go?"

"I'm not hindering you going, but as for the receipt you'll get none from me."

"Is that your last word?"

"About the receipt—yes. I may have many words to say you won't like to hear, if you stand there much longer."

"There will be no course, then, open for my brother but to stop payment of the note. He has the number; if he goes to the bank you will find the result very disagreeable."

Before Augustus Tripsdale had finished his sentence Mrs. Fermoy flung wide the sash and disappeared within the room, only to reappear at the door, which she tore open with a violence that threatened to break the lock.

"What do you mean, you upsetting atom of deformity," she cried, "coming here threatening a woman who has lived respectable and respected, and is known to be correct and honest, which is more than you could say. Just let me catch you playing any tricks with that note which my stepdaughter sent me in part payment of the long bill I have against her for board and lodging. Just let me catch you! It would be the worst day's work you ever did; my son's a man as will stand no nonsense. He's one as keeps himself to himself, and lets alone when he's let alone; but when once he's roused he's like a caged lion, and he would think as little of giving you another 'twist as I would think of wringing out my dish cloth. Be off, now, and never let me see your face again."

"You need not be afraid, Mrs. Fermoy, you never, I hope, will see my face again, or I yours. There is one thing I have to say, however——"

"Don't say it, then, I warn you. If it wasn't that you're not just like other people, and perhaps can no more help the crook in your mind than the crook in your back, I wouldn't have put up with you so long."

"Whatever I may be," answered the lad, "you had

better hear what I have to say. Miss Fermoy wants to pay you £5 a week, and get a proper receipt for that amount. If you won't give a proper receipt, that is your affair, but we will part with no more money without an acknowledgment. The weekly £5 will therefore be sent to you in a form which you must sign."

"We'll see about that; nothing will be signed by me."

"Then you won't get the money," retorted her visitor with a decision which produced its effect even on Mrs. Fermoy, and left her speechless till young Tripsdale had got too far away to hear more than an echo of the insulting retort she hurled after him.

That day the window in Mr. Parkyn's room was not cleaned so well as it might have been. There were long smears on the glass, and also a general cloudiness, which Mrs. Fermoy, had she noticed, would have attributed to the water having been left to dry, when she was so "put about by that cripple's sauce."

But in truth, she did not notice. She finished up her work all in a hurry and mechanically, giving no thought to what she was doing, save that it had to be done, and got over it as soon as possible.

For once in her life she began to think it might have been wise not to let her temper run so far and so fast. "If he had not begun about that receipt all would have been well," she decided. "I'd have asked him in and spoke him fair, and got to know what I want about Aileen. He was not so uppish as the other one, and maybe I did take him up a bit too short. I wonder whether it was true what he said about sending me five pounds a week. If it is, I ought to know how the girl is getting it; money is not lying in the gutters for any one to pick up nowadays."

She was standing in the kitchen looking at a sovereign and a handful of silver as this truth dawned upon her. Not a sound broke the stillness, save the crackling of some wood she had thrust into the grate. For once

Bertie and Minnie were conspicuous by their absence. All her sons were out. She had the house to herself, and something in its silence knocked at the door of her conscience, and woke unaccustomed echoes that sounded weird and unpleasant.

"If any harm has come to the girl," she thought, "but what harm could come to her, still how does she get five-pound notes and people to run her errands?"

Mrs. Fermoy in her perplexity went to the front door, and looked up and down the street, but no one appeared in sight. The whole place was terribly lonely. She walked as far as the shed, which was securely padlocked, then round to the empty stable, which was padlocked also.

"I can't make it out," she soliloquized. "Why Aileen should leave her happy home and good business, and desert me who had always her good at heart, is a mystery, and one I don't like. Trying to buy me off has a bad look. I'll never know a minute's peace till I've found her, and find her I will if I have to tramp London over. If she's doing nothing wrong why would she keep such a friend as I've been at arm's length."

Utterly unable to answer this self-propounded query, Mrs. Fermoy, after a fashion quite crest-fallen, returned to the kitchen and began peeling potatoes for dinner.

While she was so engaged, Minnie and Bertie rushed in, and before the vegetables were ready to put on the fire had so misbehaved themselves that Mrs. Fermoy's reflections were speedily turned into a different channel.

"I'll speak to your father about sending you to school," she exclaimed. "I have so much on my mind already I can't put up with you. What with one thing and with another, I wonder I'm not in Hanwell."

"That is where Dickey Strange says you ought to be," returned Bertie with that sweet simplicity which conceives a disagreeable truth to be immeasurably superior to politeness.

"I'll Dickie Strange you," cried Mrs. Farmoy, point-

ing her threat with a sound cuff. "Just let me see you so much as speaking to him again, that's all. Get along both of you, and don't dare to put your noses inside the door till dinner-time."

When dinner-time came, by one consent all the Connollans, old and young, streamed into the maternal mansion. Tom sulky, because his mother had regained possession of £2 odd by the simple flank movement of turning out his pocket while he slept. Dick lounged in hungry and morose. Peter, who had obtained temporary employment near at hand, was in better case, while Jack, though under a ban for having taken service with "that underhand woman," Mrs. Stenbridge, was tacitly recognized as a person to be thought of, because in the receipt of regular wages.

Peter, though older, being in less affluent circumstances, was despatched for beer, and after Minnie and Bertie had been placed at cross corners of the table so as to insure better behavior, the entertainment proceeded.

Secrecy in that house, save concerning some purely personal and selfish matter, was a thing unknown, and accordingly, even while carving, Mrs. Fermoy began to discourse about the "mis-shapen young man" who had called that morning.

"What did he want?" asked Mr. Connollan, helping himself to mustard.

"He wanted that receipt."

"And you gave it to him?"

"Indeed I didn't. I told him I had no good of the money and he'd get no receipt from me."

"What did he think of that?" asked Peter, anxious to be agreeable.

"I don't know what he thought, but he threatened to stop payment of the note."

"Oh! I dare say," commented Mr. Connollan with a mocking sneer which could not conceal his conviction that such an awkward course might be taken.

"He swore nobody was going to beat him," pro-

ceeded Mrs. Fermoy, enjoying her son's evident uneasiness.

"Who wants to beat him?"

"I suppose he thinks you do."

"Why the mischief couldn't you give him the receipt if he wanted it?"

"Just because I didn't choose."

"Were you able to find out where Aileen is gone," asked Mr. Connollan, warned by his mother's tone it might be prudent to change the conversation.

"No! I didn't try."

"If you had, I suppose you wouldn't have got much further forward."

Mrs. Fermoy did not think fit to answer this taunt. Instead she turned to Jack and asked:

"Who were those young sparks you said something about Ally carrying on with?"

"They were not young sparks, and Ally did not carry on with them," answered the lad.

"Well, what was it you told me?"

"I told you that on Whit-Tuesday three men who were dotty, carried her basket to the cart—that was all," replied Jack, repenting him of his misplaced confidence.

"And one of them had a white hat?"

"Yes, his hat was white."

"I thought so," observed Mrs. Fermoy, with an oracular nod.

"Keep your spoon out of the sugar! Who do you suppose is going to eat after you," here interrupted Dick, addressing Minnie, who in the most artless way imaginable, was administering to her own wants without the slightest regard for the absurd prejudices of other people.

"In such families a slight matter suffices to shunt the conversational train on to a different line of rail, and this remark of Dick's reversed the points so immediately that before a second had elapsed the whole of the Connollans were wrangling in the most virulent manner over the Bertie and Minnie question.

"Mrs. Fermoy declared they must go to school. Mr. Connollan retorted that it would be time enough to think of that in two or three years. Dick said what the children wanted was a good hiding, which he would give them for two pins. Peter stated that to his certain knowledge they were "wanted" for throwing stones, while Jack capped up the list of sins by affirming they were the worst pair in Battersea, and could keep their hands off nothing.

"They take after their father in that," said Mrs. Fermoy, an unkindly reminder of Saturday evening's exploit.

Not forgetful of the measure meted out to him on a similar occasion, Dick grinned, while Peter, keenly alive to the humors of the situation, laughed aloud. Even Jack smiled, and Tom waxed so wroth that, flinging down his knife and fork, he rose, and declaring passionately, "I can stand this house no longer," took his cap and left the table, pursued by a jeering remark from his mother to the effect "there was only one house would stand him," after which the remainder of the company resumed their dinner and ate a second course with great relish.

"Jack," cried Mrs. Fermoy, as her youngest son was about to leave, "tell Mrs. Stenbridge you'll not be able to go with her to-morrow morning."

"Why?" asked the boy.

"Because I want you to take me to market."

"Then I am not going to do anything of the sort," he returned.

"That's a pretty way to answer your mother. I wonder what Ally would say if she heard you?"

"She wouldn't be best pleased," he replied, softened a little, "but just because she told me to be good to you and was always good to me herself, I don't intend you to hunt her up, and that is what I know you want!"

"Hoity toity! things have come to a fine pass, I'm sure!"

"You were always bully-ragging her when you had her, and whether she's well married, or has gone into business, or what she's doing, I am very certain she wants to have no more to say to us, so if you are going over to the Borough to make a disturbance about her you'll have to go alone."

"And you tell me that to my face?"

"I do, straight," was the dutiful reply, well calculated to cause Mrs. Fermoy to drop on the nearest seat and cover her head with her apron and bemoan her fate, and ask why she had ever been born and married to two husbands and left a widow twice; and borne sons and reared them, with many other questions equally pertinent and difficult to answer.

"Cheer up, mother!" cried Dick, "what's the use of going on like that? I'll go with you in the morning."

"I always said you were the best of the bunch," observed Mrs. Fermoy, mollified. "Yes, we'll start early, and see the man Jack told us about. Do you remember what his name was?"

"Yes, Plashet."

Undreaming of the honor in store, Mr. Plashet next day, about ten o'clock, having got the worst of his business over, was devoting himself to accounts when a shadow fell across the shop, and looking up he saw a portly female trying to attract his attention.

"What is your pleasure, ma'am?" he asked, slowly advancing to the front. "What can I do for you?"

"You can tell me where my daughter is."

For once Mr. Plashet was taken aback. "Floored, upon my conscience," he stated subsequently to Mr. Johnson. He was so much taken aback, indeed, that he could only repeat as an interrogative, "Your daughter, ma'am?" in a tone of utter amazement.

"Yes, my daughter, sir, as good a girl as ever breathed, and pretty too, as you are aware, for often you've seen her. I was making breakfast ready one morning six weeks or more ago, when she laid a note down on the table to bid me good-by and went off without a word.

Since then I have sought her high and I've sought her low, till at last it crossed my mind yesterday you must know where she is and can tell me."

"And how the dickens, ma'am, should I know where your daughter is?" asked Mr. Plashet.

"You know where the gentleman she has gone off with lives."

"What gentleman?"

"The gentleman in the white hat."

"Now, Lord grant me patience. Are you mad, ma'am, or am I?"

"I am not mad," answered Mrs. Fermoy, with great dignity, "and if I must say what I think, it is that you are making believe a good deal."

"Look here," said Mr. Plashet, "you are laboring under some great mistake. I know nothing of your daughter. I never saw her so far as I am aware."

"Never saw Aileen Fermoy! that dealt with you year in year out, and paid you honest, too; never——"

"Stop a bit, stop a bit," interposed Mr. Plashet. "Fermoy—Fermoy? Why, could you not have said that at first? I do remember the name; nice, quiet-looking girl with big eyes. Yes, I recall her now, used to come over in all weathers with her brother, but I know nothing about her, have not seen her for weeks past."

"No more have I, and I am just wasting away, fretting over what has become of her?"

Mr. Plashet looked at the speaker, and could see no sign of wasting. On the contrary, her clothes appeared to be tight rather than otherwise. However, as she might have been only using a verbal figure in order to convey the idea of great mental agony, he replied:

"I am sorry, but it is impossible for me to tell you where she has gone. It is a case of 'not knowing, can't say.'"

"But, sir, you can tell me where to find your friend."

"What friend?"

"The gentleman with the white hat who took her away. The young man who came on Saturday wore a white hat too, at least very near white-gray."

Mr. Plashet sank despairingly on a stool, took off his hat, looked into it, ran his fingers through his hair, looked at his hat once more, put it on again very much to one side, and then said, "My good soul, will you explain what you mean; I know no man in a white hat."

"Oh! but you do; the one that drove a fuss with Aileen; the one she's gone off with."

"I am as wise as ever," returned Mr. Plashet; "I can't imagine who or what you are talking about."

"Can you remember last Whitsuntide as ever was?" asked Mrs. Fermoy, in a tone which indicated a rising temperature.

"I remember Whitsuntide, certainly, and—what then?"

"Why, on Whit-Tuesday my daughter came over here for her goods, and no less would serve three of your friends than to carry her baskets for her to the cart, and——"

"Gently, now, gently, I am not deaf. I recollect there was some larking, but what has that to do with this matter?"

"It has all to do with it, in a manner of speaking. The one in the white hat had a lot to say to Aileen."

"Had he?"

"Of course he had, and that's the man has taken her from us."

"How do you know?"

"I know well enough. Who else could it be? Jack says he never heard her speak to another unless it might be just, 'That's a fine day,' or 'Good afternoon,' or such like. From that morning she was a changed girl. We every one noticed how queer and different she grew—not all at once, you understand, but by degrees. Her temper got that short, if I hadn't the best of tempers myself, one house couldn't have held us, and as for the dear little children, my son's boy and

girl, they would fly like frightened hares at the sound of her very step.

"Still, I fail to see——"

"At the best, she went about like one in a dream, and if anybody spoke to her she started and looked as though roused from sleep. She was always saying she had to go into the city, too, or some other place. She has never once put foot across the threshold, except in the way of her business."

"I don't see that all this has anything to do with my friend, though."

"Maybe not, but I do. She's gone off with him right enough, with him and no other."

"We'll soon settle your mind about that," said Mr. Plashet. "Jake," he added, addressing his man, busy among the sacks as usual. "Just run round the corner and see if you can find Mr. Johnson. Tell him I'd be glad if he would step in for a moment. You'd better sit down," and vacating the stool, he indicated with a gesture that Mrs. Fermoy was at liberty to take possession.

Mrs. Fermoy, however, would do nothing of the sort. Instead, she waited with such patience as she might the return of Jake, who presently came back and unceremoniously stated, "He's comin'!"

Meanwhile, a few idlers had gathered, who treated with disdain Jake's mandate, "You be off," and seemed rather to enjoy the angry looks with which one of the actors in a drama, got up especially for their delectation, regarded them.

Presently Mr. Johnson himself appeared, clothed in a dark suit and wearing a soft wide-awake.

"This is the gentleman," said Mr. Plashet by way of introduction, and then, seeing his friend looked mystified, added—"This lady wants to know where her daughter is."

"Very happy, I am sure, to give her any information in my power; but who is the lady?"

"Mrs. Fermoy, I suppose."

"Proud to make your acquaintance, ma'am," said Mr. Johnson, raising his hat. "In what way can I have the pleasure of serving you?"

"If you'll just tell me without any more words where my daughter is, I'll thank you."

"I am not a magician, unfortunately," answered Mr. Johnson. "Plashet, is this a jest or a wager?"

"It is neither, on my part," was the reply, "and I think Mrs. Fermoy is in very serious earnest. She believes you have enticed away her daughter and——"

"I! good heavens! I know nothing about your daughter, ma'am. She's as total a stranger to me as you were five minutes ago."

"That is all very fine," returned Mrs. Fermoy, "but you can't deny you saw her last Whit-Tuesday and carried her baskets across this very market to the cart."

"Did I, really?" asked Mr. Johnson, in helpless bewilderment.

"Oh! don't get on that way! What's the use?" exclaimed Mrs. Fermoy.

"You really did," said Mr. Plashet; "you and Cox and Simmons. The girl came here for goods, and you, being still a little Whit-Mondayish, began to chaff her. She did not like it—a pretty girl—you begin to remember now."

"I do remember something about the matter; but that is months ago, and I have never set eyes on her since."

"Never met her any place either, I suppose, or sent her letters, or enticed her away from her widowed mother, or persuaded her to sell her good business for a song?" suggested Mrs. Fermoy, with scornful incredulity.

"Never, upon my honor."

"Your honor, indeed! Come, tell me where you've got her, and don't keep me standing here all day."

"I assure you, Mrs. Fermoy, you are accusing me most unjustly. I know nothing whatever about your

daughter. You might as reasonably ask Mr. Plashet where she is."

"She has," remarked that individual, who was standing a little aloof, carefully trimming his nails; "but I can make allowances. Such a trouble is enough to upset any woman."

"But why should she imagine I have anything to do with the girl's disappearance? Am I a man of that sort? Plashet, what induced you to send for me of all people on earth?"

"I sent for you because Mrs. Fermoy seemed satisfied you had something to do with the matter, and one never knows," was the calm reply.

"But I have nothing to do with it."

"I quite believe that."

"Then tell her so."

"I was just thinking what I could say to her. Will you kindly keep back?" he added, addressing the group of idlers. "What we are talking about is no concern of yours."

"Pray do not allow any feeling of shyness to mar your enjoyment," added Mr. Johnson, with an hysterical laugh; "the entertainment is got up entirely for your benefit. Stalls, boxes, dress circles, and gallery gratis, and quite free. *Dramatis personæ*. Heartbroken mother," pointing to Mrs. Fermoy, "desperate villain, myself—false friend, Mr. Plashet—first and last performance on any stage. Walk up, ladies and gentlemen; pray walk up. It is a very nice little play, but upon my soul I don't see the fun of it."

"Drat you," cried Mrs. Fermoy, furiously. "It is just what I might have expected, though. The man who would entice a girl from her duty would be sure to make game of her mother."

"Indeed you are wrong," said Mr. Plashet, shutting up his knife and putting it in his pocket. "I am sure Mr. Johnson knows no more where your daughter is than I do. Your best plan will be to go to the police, or mention your daughter's disappearance to the nearest

magistrate, then the papers will put in a paragraph, and if any harm has come to her, or she has made away with herself, you'll be sure to hear."

"Who said she'd made away with herself?"

"Why, no one; but I thought perhaps——"

"Then you may keep your thoughts till you're asked for them. What I want to know is where she has gone. As for having made away with herself, dead people don't send you five-pound notes by impudent upstarts."

"And did your daughter send a five-pound note?"

"Indeed she did, and she says she'd send five pounds every week and pay the rent; so she must be rolling in wealth some place, and——"

"Then what the deuce have you been making all this row about?" asked Mr. Plashet.

"Did you really imagine I had five-pound notes to fling about in this fashion?" supplemented Mr. Johnson.

"It is very hard to say what you sort has, or how you get it," replied Mrs. Fermoy, so vindictively that the audience tittered.

"Come, come," interposed Mr. Plashet, "none of that; keep a civil tongue in your head, or I'll have to ask you to clear off. We have been very partial with you, believing you were in trouble, and we are not going to put up with any more nonsense. If your girl is really able and willing to send you money, you are confoundedly lucky; that is all I can say."

"Permit me to ask, madam, whether your affections are free," said Mr. Johnson, with the air of a person from whose mind a load has been removed. "I have long been looking out for a lady in receipt of £5 a week with whom to share my heart, and, in fact——"

"Get along with you; do," exclaimed Mrs. Fermoy, as the speaker advanced toward her with a look intended to express devoted admiration. "It's plain to be seen that whip-snap who came on Saturday afternoon is in the same boiling with you; but you'll all be sorry, before I've ended my say, you ever meddled with me or Aileen Fermoy."

"Aileen Fermoy has come into money," cried a shrill falsetto, belonging to no one at all concerned in the conversation.

"Who spoke?" asked Mr. Plashet.

There ensued dead silence for about the space in which one might have counted six.

Then a path opened through the little crowd, and a girl, aged about fourteen, attired in a ragged black dress and fancy apron, and wearing a sailor hat with long brown hair hanging below her waist, was pushed forward to the front, when she bobbed a courtesy to Mr. Plashet.

"Was it you who said that?" he asked.

"Yes, sir, if you please."

"And what do you know about Miss Fermoy?"

"When my mother was a nursing Mrs. Jackles, two ladies come to see her, one wearing a silk dress as would have stood alone. They brought her real turtle, the same as the Lord Mayor has for his breakfast, and grapes big as walnuts, real hot-housers, and Madairy wine, and Mrs. Jackles told mother one of them used to buy greens and such like off her, but that she had come into money and did not forget old times, and she said Aileen Fermoy was always a good girl, and she felt glad luck had turned with her."

For a moment this sentence, poured forth in a breath, seemed to petrify those who heard. Mrs. Fermoy was the first to recover herself.

"I'll go this minute and see Mrs. Jackles," she said. "I'll soon be at the bottom of the matter now. This woman will tell me what I want to know."

"I don't think she will," said Mr. Plashet with his usual *sang froid*.

"Why not?"

"Because she's dead," which, though not a very lively statement, caused a shout of laughter.

"The performance is over," remarked Mr. Johnson to the lookers-on. "You can sing 'God Save the Queen,' if you like."

CHAPTER XIX.

• QUITE HAPPY.

It is pathetic to consider how, with some otherwise admirable persons, any accession of wealth only produces greater pecuniary difficulty, and all efforts at retrenchment lead to increased expenditure.

"By no means run in debt," says George Herbert.

"Take thine own measure.

"Who cannot live on twenty pounds a year

"Cannot on forty——"

Which remark is true of forty thousand pounds a year as of the humble forty, because the larger an income any one of such a temperament has to spend the more abundantly do opportunities present themselves for squandering that income unwisely.

Mr. Edward Desborne was a striking example of the truth of the assertion that there are men to whom good gifts prove curses instead of blessings. All his life some one had been trying to benefit him, all his life he had been trying, not without success, to render those benefits nugatory. No friendship he formed, and he formed many, proved of the slightest personal advantage to this popular young man. He was always using his friends, his connections, his family, for the advantage of some one else. After a fashion, he remained contentedly out in the cold, while others basked beside fires of his lighting, kept going by fuel of his supplying. A charming fellow, said a world not much given to unselfishness—yes, a delightful fellow, whether to live with, to talk with, or ask a favor from, yet, nevertheless, as time went on, his uncle began to

understand these delightful fellows, in whom there was a deficiency.

"Too unselfish, too generous," he observed to the then head of the Desborne firm.

"Can a man be too unselfish and too generous?" asked Mr. Frederick Desborne in return.

"I am afraid so, I think Ned is," was the reply.

When the Kilroy estates drifted into Cloak Lane for adjustment, or rather, for some one learned in legal lore to try whether a pittance might not be found amid the mortgages on which the old Earl might support life, Mr. Edward Desborne was by one consent selected as the emissary of his firm and sent to condole with so distinguished a client on the ravages, dicing, card playing, horse-racing, actresses, and extravagant living had wrought in the once goodly revenues granted by a king to his mistress.

The Kilroys had from the first been a wild, bad, unprincipled lot. They had paid as little as they could avoid, they had spent as much as they could get, they had been in no way particular either about their own wives and estates or about the wives and estates of other people. There was always a divorce suit hanging over the Kilroys in some connection in the good old days, there were many duels in the air likewise, as well as chancery proceedings and proceedings at common law, there had been trials concerning legitimacy and settlements and claims by ill-disposed persons, in which money lent and not repaid formed a prominent and interesting feature. What with sons joining fathers and heirs joining owners in raising loans for mutual benefit, the Kilroy lands were up to the hilt in debt, so that when Lord Hewitt Harlingford succeeded on his brother's death to the earldom of Kilroy, he found himself the inheritor of a title which few respected, twenty miles or so of barren land in Simon Bay Inland, the family mansion much out of repair in Midlandshire, a library filled with books he could not sell and did not care to read, a number of old family portraits

of no particular value, stables in which there were no horses, and gardens going to wreck and ruin, that it would have required a small fortune to keep up. Further, his nephew, who in the ordinary course would have succeeded to the Earldom but wisely died before doing so, left three daughters who were permitted by the new owner to reside in the family mansion.

He had a great idea of the claims of kinship, and perhaps felt he owed a small debt to inherit. However all this might be, he allowed them to remain when he, Hewitt Harlington, came into his own.

They had a little money which was spent on their education and dress, and for the rest their keep did not cost much. The world said his conduct was worthy of all praise, and no doubt he thought so himself. He knew he could save nothing for them, so from an early age they were made aware they would have to shift for themselves, which two of them did by marrying, not so well as they would have liked, but as well as they could. Emily, the second girl, did not "go off" soon, she had set her young affections on Claud, the heir presumptive. If the old Earl did not marry, or, if he did marry, had no son, Claud must succeed, and though there was little money, Emily felt she would like to be Countess of Kilroy, but Claud's mother, having other views for her son, married him to a rich wife. It is hard for a young lady to be disappointed in such a manner, and Miss Harlington felt the blow keenly. She passed and made other people pass through a very sad time indeed. Miss Simpson could have told many stories about that sorrowful period, but Miss Simpson was not in the habit of telling tales, so the outside world heard nothing of the anger and heart-burnings that made life unpleasant at Cotway Park.

It was about a couple of years after this shock that Lord Kilroy's affairs got into such a state of entanglement that it became necessary to consult a lawyer. The family solicitor being on the other side, by some freak of fate, matters were put into the hands of Messrs. Des-

borne, and Edward Desborne consequently saw the Earl at the Lory's Hotel, where that nobleman was staying. From the lady who had succeeded in leading a sovereign from the straight path of virtue new descendants had inherited many graces of manner, which they could exert when occasion demanded.

It seemed to Lord Kilroy, who really was about the kindest and best of his race, that as this young lawyer might find a way to help even such an impecunious client, it would be well worth while to conciliate him, which idea he carried out by not merely treating Mr. Desborne in the most courteous manner, but by asking him to Cotway Park.

It is but justice to add that when giving this invitation, which only meant pursuing their consultations in the country rather than in town, the Earl had not the remotest intention of securing a husband for his niece.

Such a notion never entered Lord Kilroy's mind. It had occurred to him that it might be rather a good thing if their Rector would think of Emily and propose for her, but match-making was not in his line, and when the Rector did not evince any passionate desire to partake of such hospitality as Cotway Park ever extended to any one, he wisely let the matter drop. His other nieces had managed their matrimonial affairs for themselves. No doubt in time Emily would follow their excellent example. At all events, he was not bound to find a husband for her, and yet when he asked young Desborne this was precisely what he did do.

If ever a man fell in love at first sight, that man was Edward Desborne. He was no snob, yet it would be perhaps going too far to say Cotway Park and the Earl of Kilroy and Emily's own small courtesy, title, and the pervading atmosphere of nobility failed to produce an effect upon him.

To feel certain, as he did afterwards, that had his adored one been a milkmaid, he would have worshipped her all the same, sounded very well, but could only be regarded as absolutely incorrect. It was her

air of birth and breeding, of calm indifference, of utter superiority, her voice, her movements, her manners, that played such havoc with his heart.

His uncle might be quite right when he said the Harlingfords owed their title to a disreputable baggage, with no other merits than a sweet voice and neat foot and ankle, but it was a long time since that young person danced and thrilled before her sovereign, and during all those years the Harlingfords had been sleeping on down and feeding daintily, having servants at their beck and call, and doing no manner of menial work themselves. Every family must have seen a beginning, and Patty was almost hidden in the mists of centuries, or at least would have been but for a portrait extant in one of the royal palaces, a roguish, laughing portrait of a girl, pretty enough to make even an anchorite forget the sin in admiration of the sinner. Besides, the sin was such an old world story, and manners and morals were different then, at least so people said, though this is a question on which one may be permitted to hold one's own opinion, and the Harlingfords had married and intermarried with families who held their heads very high and thought a great deal of themselves, and the origin of the Kilroys had nothing whatever to do with Miss Harlingford, who was the loveliest, the best, the tenderest, the most captivating creature who ever deigned to tread this common earth.

The tale of Mr. Edward Desborne's love affair need not be pursued further; it ran smoothly, and was expedited by the fact that the young lawyer managed to procure some money for the old Peer's needs. Moreover, he had it in his power to settle ten thousand pounds, which came to him through his mother, on Miss Harlingford. Lord Kilroy satisfied himself the Desbornes were persons possessed not merely of a long pedigree but a long purse.

"Excellent old-fashioned business," he said, repeating what his banker had told him, "which must return a fine income, profession more profitable than land now,

father rich, only son, uncle immensely wealthy, been hoarding for thirty years, will leave every sou to his nephew, clever young fellow, Desborne, managed my little matter splendidly, bowled Daggington over completely, may rise high, people of that sort do rise high in these days, very different once, but other times other manners (Mr. Thomas Desborne wasn't at hand to ask what manners obtained in those better times, when Patty rose to eminence), on the whole Emily has not done badly. Girls without a penny have no chance of meeting with their peers. This is an age in which money is everything."

Money had been everything to the Harlingfords in all ages, but such a mere detail was unworthy of mention.

The proposed marriage satisfied every one, except the bride and Mr. Thomas Desborne, both of whom, for excellent reasons, kept their opinions to themselves.

Even the perspective Earl and Countess graced the wedding ceremony to which the whole family gave their countenance, and said Emily had done remarkably well for herself. The Desbornes, father and son, were voted to be "really quite presentable," and though the rich uncle was conspicuous by his absence, he sent a handsome gift, and the Harlingfords represented and believed he stayed away merely that he might add a few more thousands to the many already profitably invested for the benefit of Emily's husband.

Everything, in a word, went off admirably. The bride's noble relations behaved in a charming manner. The Earl spoke quite tenderly of the bridegroom, and was deeply affected while alluding to the impending separation from his dear niece whom he had always secretly disliked. Mr. and the Honorable Mrs. Desborne started for the Continent, the Harlingfords dispersed to their several homes, or to the homes of other people, and Cotway Park resumed its ordinary look of neglect and dulness.

If the firm in Cloak Lane expected any increase of

business to result from the Kilroy alliance, such anticipations were doomed to disappointment.

No Desborne was again consulted by any one of the distinguished family, the old Earl died without settling his "little bill," and as his relations did not settle it for him the amount had to be written off the Desbornes' books.

"We are the poorer by that much and the worse by a wife," thought Mr. Thomas Desborne, but he did not say anything, only continued adding to that mound of wealth the Harlingfords had seen as in a glass—very clearly.

To help the young people, Mr. Desborne not merely waived his life interest in that ten thousand pounds settled on Miss Harlingford, but bought the lease of a house in York Terrace for them and furnished that house throughout.

After a time, the less distinguished members of Mrs. Desborne's family were good enough to provide guests in sufficient numbers to fill the new home—indeed, the relays were so unceasing that in the season it became necessary to provide a larger residence for their accommodation out of town.

It was in this way Ashwater came to be purchased. Some one told the highly privileged husband it was a nice place and could be had cheap, whereupon he at once bethought him he would much prefer a settled summer house to wandering from one furnished house to another.

Mr. Frederick Desborne thought this idea a good and sensible one. Renting furnished villas runs into money, for which at the end of a few months there is nothing to show, "whereas," thus he sapiently observed to his brother, "a house you buy is always your house."

"And if you live in it, always a source of expense," added that astute gentleman, but as usual his words of wisdom were not heeded, and the end of the matter was that he bought, not the freehold of Ashwater as Mr. Tovey supposed, but the lease, and presented it to his

nephew with the remark that he hoped "the place would really be the means of saving money."

When a man, however, lives in the city and does not believe in the necessity of going out of town or taking a holiday, his opinions can scarcely be expected to carry much weight, especially when the person who listens to them holds views diametrically opposite. Mr. Edward Desborne, however, was most grateful for the gift and assured his uncle it would largely reduce his expenditures. He fully believed this at the time, and as, when that not far distant day arrived, which brought him knowledge of his mistake, he said nothing concerning it, Mr. Thomas Desborne never imagined how many furnished houses might each season have been rented for the amount Ashwater swallowed up.

But though the owner was aware his outgoings were heavy, money pressure did not much inconvenience him for a long time. When his father died, he succeeded to all that prudent parent's worldly wealth, and though the amount was far below the sum, people believed it paid all debts and left a margin wide enough to enable him to live without anxiety for some years, during which the profits made in Cloak Lane steadily declined, and the expenses of Mr. Edward Desborne's household as steadily increased.

So far as this world is concerned, a man had better be wicked than weak. About the next we do not know, but possibly the same fact may hold true then likewise. Whatever good others tried to compass for him, the Head of the Firm changed into evil for himself. Even when that suggestion of Mr. Thomas Desborne's concerning Aileen Fermoy was carried out, his nephew managed to make the additional income a total loss by presenting it to Mrs. Desborne as a peace-offering, and saddling himself with every additional expense necessitated by the scheme.

But Aileen knew nothing of all this, was unaware how unwelcome the arrangement had seemed to the lady she admired with an intensity which amounted

to devotion, and had not the faintest suspicion of the cares hidden under Mr. Desborne's kindly smile.

To her, existence at that time seemed beautiful as a fairy dream.

Though Miss Simpson was constantly saying: "Do this" or "do not do that," she never made the girl feel her deficiencies painfully. Never had pupil a kinder teacher, never had teacher a more appreciative pupil. Mr. Thomas Desborne need not have feared that Ashwater would have appeared dull to either of the women so strangely associated. The country proved an experience as delightful as new to Aileen, while her sunny temper made even wintry skies and leafless trees charming to Miss Simpson.

There is no mental tonic or physical beautifier to equal happiness, and Aileen was happy as she could be. Care and she seemed to have bid each other a final farewell. The old life at Battersea so sordid, so miserable, yet so full of brave struggle, gallant endeavor, and patient self-denial, faded often almost entirely from memory, and the good and peaceful present took its place.

Though she had sufficient good sense not to speak of that hard past she was in no way ashamed of her own part in it. The violence, the laziness, and the extravagance which had made her former home wretched were terrible to remember, but the contrast with Ashwater did not accentuate the misery of her recollections.

She was young, and youth has elasticity; she was kind and she had plenty of opportunities for showing kindness, she felt she was learning to be "like a lady," she had the next best thing to talent—a loyal admiration for talent in others.

"Are you happy here?" asked Mr. Thomas Desborne, one Sunday when he was walking through the garden with her.

"Yes, indeed, I am," she answered. "Quite happy, perfectly happy."

CHAPTER XX.

PRETTY MISS WILTON.

Miss Simpson and her charge were not left to their own devices so completely at Teddington as had been the case in London. The Valley of the Thames is a place where beauty of wealth, or even a person who lives in a fairly good house, is seldom permitted to remain entirely secluded from society. Liking to visit it assumes the generality of people like to be visited, and resented the fact that Mrs. Desborne only cared to be called upon by great people.

Many ladies who would not see in what way she was much better than themselves disparaged her at afternoon teas and remarked that although she might be an Earl's grand-daughter, she was a solicitor's wife. They talked slightly also of her visitors who did not, Teddington thought, behave nicely, seeming to imagine the river belonged to them and the railway station too.

It is a true saying that we dislike those we do not know, and as Mrs. Desborne would not know her neighbors, her neighbors disliked her and her friends very cordially indeed, and felt it a scandal Ashwater should be inhabited by such people. Of course it was not Mr. Desborne's fault. No one could be more charming. All the gentlemen spoke in his praise, and so did every lady who travelled with him, but then his manners, though delightful, failed to open the gates of Ashwater to Miss This and Mrs. That, not even a child was asked to make friends with the little boy, and Teddington could but consider such a state of things very wrong.

Laudably anxious to set wrong right, when Miss Simpson and Aileen were seen to enter Ashwater, it was decided to call on them, and for the first time in her life Aileen had an opportunity of learning what pleasant and satisfying things morning calls are.

She was at first afraid of talking herself, but listened while Miss Simpson and the ladies talked; after some time, however, she began to take a small part in the conversation herself, notably when help was needed to buy coals, or open a soup kitchen, or assist an orphan, or gladden the heart of a widow.

Then she delighted to give. There never was such a girl for giving, and she thought so little of what she did, and was so modest and sweet and pretty, every one felt it to be "most sad she was not a lady."

One bright frosty day, early in the new year, a young lady entered the library, where Aileen was struggling with the humors of a French grammar, and greeted her with a familiar warmth which seemed as unusual as surprising.

"How do you do?" she began. "We only came home on Saturday, or I should have called sooner. You must be moped to death in this stupid place. Awful luck, I call it, to be stuck down in such a hole all through the winter, with not a soul in the neighborhood who can talk of anything but dorcas meetings and bazaars! I hope you loathe fancy work?"

"I am very stupid about fancy work," answered Aileen.

"That's right; you can't be too stupid about everything most womanlike to suit me. I know we shall get on famously—I said so to the dad as we came home from church. He will go to church—thinks it looks respectable. He does not confess that of course, but I know. Let's see, your name's Fermoy, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Ah! felt sure it couldn't be Simpson, though the dad as usual got muddled and persisted the elderly

party was Mrs. or Miss Fermoy. Well, and what relation is she of yours?"

"Who do you mean? I scarcely understand."

"The elderly party. The old lady, if you like that phrase better, I saw with you in church."

"Miss Simpson? she is no relation of mine."

"Then why does she live with you?"

"Because she is teaching me," replied Aileen, after a second's hesitation.

"Teaching you! What?"

"Everything."

"Nonsense, you are chaffing me."

"Indeed I am not. Why should I?"

"I can't tell, just for a bit of fun, perhaps."

It seemed to Aileen that her visitor must have curious notions about fun, but she kept silence while the other went on.

"Don't be offended. I did not intend to vex you, only what you said seemed so odd."

"Very likely, but it is true."

"Most people get all that sort of thing over when children, with the beautiful result of making one's youth wretched. How nice it must have been for you to learn no lessons in your early days."

"I did learn lessons, but not the sort I am learning now."

"I want to be great friends with you; so don't you think it might turn out a good plan if you began right away and told me all about yourself."

"I have nothing to tell about myself."

"I dare say. You are a great heiress, aren't you?"

"I have some money, a good deal for me."

"Oh! you lucky creature, and it was left to you by some one who thought you were a saint, a girl only a little lower than the angels, if not exactly on a level with them."

"I don't think that was why the money came to me," answered Aileen, laughing.

"Mrs. King Ferrers, who scratches out everything

about other folks' affairs—the old cat—said you came by your fortune in that way."

"She is mistaken. It came from a person I never saw, my father's uncle."

"How extraordinary. My father had plenty of uncles, yet they never left him or me a penny. Indeed, I don't know that they possessed a penny they could leave. And so you are very rich!"

"I believe I am rich!"

"Now, I do call that unfair. We are always being told Providence orders things wisely and well, but I can't think it. Why, for instance, was money given to you who sit indoors poring over a French grammar, and when you go out only poke about after poor old women and sickly young ones, whereas if any uncle of my father or mother, or uncle of anybody else, had seen fit to leave me a fortune I'd have led the way."

"Where?"

"Wherever there was plenty of life going. I'd have been a M. F. H. for one thing."

"What's that?"

"My dear, Miss Simpson is neglecting your education shamefully. Can you ride?"

Aileen shook her head.

"Well, you ought to begin to learn at once, tell her I'll be happy to teach you. On second thoughts, tell her I think I had better take her place altogether. Her system of education is far too antiquated—exploded long ago. Yes, that would be delightful. Should you not like to have me for a governess?"

"I know so little of you" said Aileen, somewhat at a loss how to answer.

"And I know so little of you; but I feel no doubt we would get on splendidly. You need not look so frightened, however. I won't bring over my traps to-night. For one reason, because the dad couldn't spare me; I could spare him very well, but that is always the way in this contrary world. Good gracious child, don't look so shocked. If one may not speak freely about one's

father, about whom may one speak? I don't say anything concerning my dad I don't say before his face. I am always telling him that of all the selfish, fidgetty, close-fisted humbugs on earth he is the chief. A most undutiful, disobedient, ungrateful dad to a hardworking, suffering daughter. What are you staring at, Miss Fermoy? It is not good form to stare in that way."

"I am so sorry," stammered Aileen, coloring. "I was only——"

"Well, go on. You were only——"

"Thinking how lovely you are," exclaimed the other in desperation.

Most unceremoniously the visitor had thrown back her boa, and sat with her fair white throat open to view. There never was any one who possessed so white a throat and so fair a face, thought Aileen, and persons who had seen much more of the world and the people in it than Timothy Fermoy's daughter might have excused her coming to the same conclusion.

"Now, I call that the sweetest speech. I never had such a pretty compliment paid me before," exclaimed the other, rising and taking hold of Aileen's hand impulsively. "I should like to kiss you for it, but we have not known each other long enough for such a ceremony, I am afraid. Will you get a shawl and take me through the grounds? I should like of all things to see them."

"Certainly, I will just run up and tell Miss Simpson I am going out."

"Where is the admirable Miss Simpson who, I hope, will not consider it necessary to accompany us."

"She is laid up with a cold, I am sorry to say."

"Pray assure her of my profound regret. I trust ere long, however, to have the pleasure of making her acquaintance. See, take my card and the dad's too, and add *he* also will be more than delighted to make her acquaintance."

"Miss Wilton, Homefield Lodge. Major Wilton, Junior Army & Navy Club," read Miss Simpson, after

the blind had been raised a little. "Go, by all means, my dear, take her wherever she wishes, only wrap up well—we must not have any more invalids in the house."

"In wet seasons the lawn becomes invisible, I suppose," suggested Miss Wilton, as they strolled along. "It is one of the great charms of this enchanting neighborhood that old Father Thames so often pays a visit to the drawing-room. I am always glad when he does, because then we must go away, and any place, in my opinion, is better than home."

"Oh! do you think so?"

"Of course, and so does every one possessed of any common sense. There is nothing about which more 'tommy rot' is talked than home, unless it may be relations. 'Blood is thicker than water' is being continually dinned into our ears, or 'there is no one like your own,' whereas the plain, honest truth is that relations are always either so respectable they are half-ashamed of us, or they are so disreputable we are wholly ashamed of them, and it is precisely the same with that much vaunted residence home; either we are not wanted there, or else we don't want to go there. I am sick of all that sort of humbug."

Aileen looked startled, no one knew better than she how correct Miss Wilton's bitter opinion was, yet it hurt her because she had believed her own experience to be exceptional, and the words of wisdom which declared home was not home, or the relations thrust upon us at birth preferable to the friends we make for ourselves, seemed to uproot some pleasant superstition without substituting any better faith in its stead.

"I should have thought," she said, softly, a kindly tact teaching her the very reply to make under difficult circumstances, "that you were always wanted at home."

"Of course I am," answered Miss Wilton, "and that only proves the correctness of what I have just said. My father, when he is in other folks' houses, can exist

without me admirably, but when he is what he calls 'bivouacking' in his own, he is unable to support life unless consoled by my presence. I am fairly well educated and accomplished as girls go, but I have to stop in this awful place all the winter because no one can make an omelet or poach an egg or send in such coffee as I. It is lively, isn't it, to consider all the money a credulous old godmother wasted on the modern equivalents to the three Rs was spent merely that I might tot up laundress's bills and keep down tradesmen's books, but I lose myself in admiration of the dad's cleverness when I talk of how he managed to break me in. Let us change the painful subject. How do you stable your horses with Mrs. Desborne?"

"I have only seen her twice for a few minutes each time."

"Soho, soho!" exclaimed Miss Wilton.

Aileen had not the faintest notion what this phrase meant, and waited for further information, none came, however.

"Have you seen Mr. Desborne only twice also?" asked Miss Wilton.

"Oh, no, I have been often at his office, and he has been down here several times."

"Yes?" said the other, but if she meant this as a fishing monosyllable she must have been disappointed, for Aileen did not rise to the bait.

"Model husband, isn't he?"

"He is an excellent one, I am told."

"Does not plunge, or anything of that sort?" Whether the words contained, a statement or a question, they did not please Aileen, who answered a little shortly:

"I am sure he does nothing but what he ought to do."

Miss Wilton burst out laughing, she had a sweet laugh, and her merriment echoed pleasantly across the river.

"You go boating in the summer, I suppose?" she said.

"I have never been at Ashwater in the summer."

"Of course not. I forgot, how stupid I am; but you will go boating when the fine weather comes?"

"It is not likely we shall be here then."

"Why, where will you be?"

"In London, I imagine."

"Oh! that's the way of it," commented Miss Wilton, and as Aileen did not reply the pair walked down to the landing-place in silence.

"I don't care much for the water myself," said the visitor, looking into the Thames as she spoke, "but then I suppose I take very little interest in anything but horses."

"But horses," repeated Aileen, bewildered.

"Yes, riding, racing, hunting," exclaimed Miss Wilton, leaning over the railing and breaking a twig off the weeping ash which swept the stream.

"And do you hunt?" exclaimed the other in a gradual *crescendo*.

"Rather," was the reply.

"And aren't you afraid?"

"It is the greatest delight of my life, except——"

"Except what?"

"I ought to have said I would rather hunt than do anything in the world, except ride a race."

"A race," repeated Aileen, in bewildered amazement, for she felt dizzy with the number of surprises heaped upon her. "What sort of a race?"

"The sort is not very material," replied Miss Wilton, "preferably a steeple-chase."

"But people are killed in steeple-chases sometimes."

"Of course they are."

"And you might be killed."

"So I might in hunting, so I might in walking along the road—can only die once, however."

Aileen did not know what to say to this extraordinary

girl. She had vaguely thought of remonstrating when Major Wilton was on the *tapis*. She had felt for one moment it would be right to remind so plain-spoken a daughter of the commandment which with promise directs that a father and mother shall be honored, but as the words were trembling on her lips there recurred a memory of Mrs. Fermoy, and utterance failed.

It is always the foolish or the inexperienced who are ready to blame and swift to advise. Aileen was neither foolish nor inexperienced, so consequently held her peace about races and steeple-chases, as she had held it concerning the, to her, still unknown author of Miss Wilton's being.

"We had better be getting back to the house," said that young lady at last, breaking another twig off the ash-tree. "I must not keep you too long from your friend and guide Miss Simpson, lest she should forbid me to come again, and I want to come again, and I want you to come and see me, will you?"

"Yes," Aileen answered, "I will."

"And bring Miss Simpson round to tea, that is, if she is soon able to leave the calm seclusion of her own apartment. I shall expect to see you at any rate very soon."

"Thank you," said Aileen. "I hope it won't be long before we both get round to Homefield Lodge."

"Have you ever seen a race?" asked Miss Wilton, looking with a strange interest at the pure, calm face of the girl who walked beside her.

"Never."

"You must go with us to Sandown some day. It is such a pretty course. We generally ride over, but we'll make up a party and drive and have a jolly outing. I don't think we shall be letting our house this summer. It has got into such a state nobody would take the place, unless it were done up, and the dad has no money to do up anything, so likely we shall remain here now till we begin to grow."

"I wish you were going to stay too," replied Aileen.

"So do I, though I wish even more that we were *not* going to stay. But never say die, London is not Australia, and though the London & South Western Rail is slow, it is sure."

Her best friend, if one so destitute of friends might be supposed to possess a best, could not have described Aileen Fermoy as an amusing companion. She was pleasant to live with by reason of her sweet temper, good sense and ready sympathy, but other of the qualities which go to make up what is called "good company" she had not. If she ever said anything funny she did so by the purest accident. Life had perhaps presented too serious an aspect for her to see the humorous side of it; Mrs. Fermoy's vagaries only filled her with despair, and Bertie and Minnie's sinfulness with dismay. In the terrible atmosphere of Field Prospect Road, she had well-nigh forgotten how to laugh. Indeed, it would have required a most unusual sense of the ludicrous to find aught to laugh at in Mrs. Fermoy's self-esteem, in Tom's self-deception, in Dick's persistent determination to go to perdition by his own self-chosen road, in Peter's spasmodic attempts to earn his living, and Jack's contemptuous estimate of every one except John Connollan and Parole, and Aileen found nothing save what was so sad, sordid, and depressing that her then experiences left deep marks on her nature for life.

At the best, however, it may be doubted whether she even possessed that faculty which carries many with cheerful light-heartedness over very stony ways. The girl took life seriously, and Miss Simpson, who had been compelled to take life very seriously also, thought she was perfectly right to do so.

"Nevertheless, human nature being inconsistent, there were times when the elder woman's soul yearned for the companionship of some one less averse to mimicry, more given to gossip, gayer, livelier, more trivial, fonder of dress and the world's vanities, "but

not better," added Miss Simpson, with a tinge of compensation. "In that she scarcely could be."

"Well, my dear," she exclaimed, as Aileen entered the apartment where she was curing her cold with various potions concocted by herself, which she declared to be "worth all the doctors' stuff in the world," sand-bags, poultices, lozenges, shawls, and abundant clothing, "you have been a long while away. Has your visitor gone?"

"She went some time since," answered Aileen, who, truth to tell, had been wandering up and down the river-walk trying without success to decide what she thought of Miss Wilton. "See, I found some winter aconite in the shrubbery, is it not pretty? Does it not look like spring?"

Aileen herself looked like spring, with a bright light in her eyes and a color in her cheeks, she brought in with her, too, quite a rush of pure fresh air, which, though pleasant to any one in health, made the invalid shiver and wrap herself up closer.

Besides, she did not want to hear about opening buds or the delusive promises of early spring, rather, she wished to learn all she could be told concerning Miss Wilton and her father.

"Yes, very pretty, put them outside the door," she replied, referring to the aconite, not their neighbors at Homefield Lodge. "I don't approve of flowers in bedrooms, they are unhealthy and often cause a chill; that will do. Now sit down and tell me whether Miss Wilton seems a young lady likely to prove a desirable acquaintance."

"She was very friendly," answered Aileen, "and said she felt most anxious to make your acquaintance."

"So you told me, my dear, when you brought up her card," observed Miss Simpson, in a tone of gentle reproof. What can be more tiresome than, when eagerly searching after new facts, to hear the same old story repeated in precisely the same words.

"But after that she said again she hoped you would

be able to call soon and take a cup of tea with her," persisted Aileen, who being on safe ground felt naturally disinclined to leave it.

"Very polite, just what I should have expected, it will give me great pleasure, I am sure. The Wiltons are such good people, Mr. Thomas Desborne knows all about them."

If left to her own unassisted genius, "good" was perhaps not the precise word Aileen would have employed in connection with Miss Wilton, but she understood the sense in which Miss Simpson used it, and accepted the new reading as though unaware there could be any other.

"Major Wilton," went on Miss Simpson, finding her pupil remained respectfully silent, an embarrassing habit in which she too frequently indulged, "is a direct descendant of Admiral Wilton, who performed such prodigies of valor when the Spanish Armada was menacing England. Many members of the family have since then loyally served their country both by sea and land. Major Wilton himself is no degenerate son of an ancient race. He fought with great distinction at many places abroad." Here Miss Simpson coughed, said it was turning cold, and asked Aileen to throw another log on the fire, all little ruses to cover the fact that she could not recollect the name of any one of those celebrated places, though she had been racking her brain to do so.

"Miss Wilton must be young," she went on, discreetly leaving distant battles to be fought over again by those better acquainted with their whereabouts. "Her father did not marry until considerably over forty—he, I conclude, is quite a middle-aged man by this time."

Aileen, expert enough in the mental arithmetic her Battersea experience had necessitated, worked out a rough-and-ready calculation with the result that she found Major Wilton had certainly reached middle life and passed it.

She did not confide the result, however, to Miss Simp-

son, for that lady had an airy way of talking about age which she believed reduced it considerably, only contented herself with remarking:

"Miss Wilton looks younger than I do, but she talks as if she were older."

"Living in the world would cause her to do that," said Miss Simpson. "I have no doubt she has mixed freely in society."

Miss Fermoy did not feel sure on this point. She had no knowledge to guide her, so again she was wise enough to refrain from speech.

"Is she good-looking?" asked Miss Simpson, who never could comprehend Aileen's unfeminine reluctance to discourse freely about people.

"She is the most beautiful creature you ever saw," declared the girl, with enthusiasm. "I have not seen many ladies, of course," she added, apologetically, "so very likely I am no judge, but I do think you will say she is most beautiful."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Miss Simpson, surprised by this burst of eloquence. "What is her style? Is she fair or dark, handsome or only pretty?"

"She is perfectly lovely," returned Aileen with conviction.

"But that does not answer my question, try to describe her. Is she tall or short, for instance?"

"Short, rather than tall, but so slight she looks taller than she really is. Her hair is black, if you know what I mean, which seems to shine in the light, her eyes——"

"Yes," said Miss Simpson, as Aileen paused.

"I was trying to tell you about them, they are not black and yet they are dark as night. I do not know what color to call them. I never saw eyes like them before."

"They are brown, perhaps."

"No, oh, no, they are strange eyes, they are——"

"Never mind her eyes," suggested Miss Simpson, who did not see that any good purpose could be

served by puzzling over this matter. What sort of nose has Miss Wilton?"

"Small and straight," answered Aileen, promptly, "and I can't be sure, but it has just occurred to me, that her eyes may be what are called very, very deep blue. They are——"

"Black hair, deep blue eyes, small straight nose," interrupted Miss Simpson again, "very good, very good indeed, so far—delicate black eyebrows, I suppose, and long black eyelashes. I know the sort of thing, fair, soft skin. Such girls have almost always nice complexions."

"Her complexion is like milk," broke in Aileen. "I have often read about that peculiar white, but I never really knew what a milk white meant till to-day, and yet Miss Wilton's complexion is clearer, more transparent I ought to say, than milk."

"I am sure it must be very nice," kindly observed Miss Simpson, "and her mouth?"

"I don't remember anything about her mouth, except that the lips are daintily red, and the teeth most exquisite—out of a picture there never can have been anything like her, and I don't believe any picture ever drawn was so beautiful."

"Your description makes me feel anxious to see this wonderful young lady. Is she at all conceited or affected?"

"Oh, no!" said Aileen, but she did not try to tell Miss Simpson what Miss Wilton was or what she had said, except that she made herself very pleasant and talked about a great many things.

They had gone down to the river and seen a couple of swans. They stood watching them for a little; but then the day turned and Miss Wilton felt cold, so they walked back to the house.

Not much to be got out of these interesting items, and Miss Simpson felt that as usual Aileen's conversational powers were not of a high order. Any other girl would have described the make and material of the

visitor's dress, repeated every word she uttered, and given her impression of the young lady's character and disposition. Not so Aileen, certainly there was some want about Timothy Fermoy's daughter, still she was kind and good and true.

"I think I should like a cup of tea now," said Miss Simpson, "if Holmes would bring it up."

"I will tell her," volunteered Aileen, and made her escape, well pleased her examination in chief was finished, for she did not want to say anything concerning Miss Wilton's amazing confidences and startling modes of speech, which she feared might seem to Miss Simpson like some of those portents which we are told will herald the coming of the Last Day!

CHAPTER XXI.

VISITORS.

Aileen need not have feared the effect Miss Wilton's eccentricities were likely to produce. Miss Simpson fell in love with her at first sight, and we all know that while that state of mind continues, the object beloved can do no wrong.

Miss Wilton at all events could do no wrong. There is no fact more certain than that one person may steal a horse, though another may not even with quite honest intentions look over the gate. Miss Wilton might have stolen many horses, and Miss Simpson continued to believe her innocent. The poor lady's heart was taken by storm, and she had no power of reason left. If the girl did talk lightly of her father, why it was only talk, where could a more devoted daughter be found? It was quite beautiful to think of her making game pies, and preparing salads, and arranging *recherché* little dinners and improvising appetizing suppers for a man who had no doubt lost his liver in India and in consequence proved rather trying at home.

"The poor, pretty little thing!" exclaimed Miss Simpson, "only think of the way she slaves! If she does exclaim now and then it is quite natural, and besides it is all said in fun."

Aileen had her own notion about this which she kept to herself. It seemed strange to her that Miss Simpson felt so constantly constrained to defend Major Wilton's daughter, when no one was accusing that young lady, but in truth the defence happened to be against the whisperings of Miss Simpson's own com-

mon sense, which were always suggesting the new favorite was somehow not quite thorough, rather than the puzzled silence in which Timothy Fermoy's daughter heard the petulant complaints and whimsical repinings her lively young friend fulminated against her "dad" and destiny.

Before March came in, like a lamb, Major Wilton called at Ashwater and solemnly paid his respects to the two ladies. A most gentlemanly, inscrutable person, who, at a distance, looked quite juvenile, but grew older with each step which brought him nearer to the beholder. Generally he wore the shortest of reefing jackets and a soft felt head-covering, which his daughter described as "a lad of a hat," rakish to an extent, though it harmonized with the rest of his attire as no other hat could.

He thanked Miss Simpson and Miss Fermoy, in a voice that trembled with emotion, for their kindness to his "poor little girl." He was more than grateful, she was so truly alone, she had so few friends, he did not care for her to associate "with everyone," and those of his family that might be of advantage to her were too rich, too grand for them to visit on equal terms.

"The earthen and the iron pot, you know, my dear madam," he said with tears in his old eyes. "The fact is I ought not to have married. I should have gone far away and left my angel in her peaceful home, but I was selfish. I snatched at the chance of a St. Martin's summer of happiness, and I was happy—perfectly. Now my dear child has to suffer for that; her young life has been a long winter, a long, cold winter."

As Miss Simpson, though much touched, did not know exactly what answer to make to a speech so private and confidential, she only murmured something concerning sympathy and regret, which, however, Major Wilton snatched at.

He felt content now about his darling girl: for the first time since leaving school she had the opportunity

of enjoying young society. If he might say so, without giving offence, from the moment she saw Miss Simpson and Miss Fermoy her heart went out to them. He did feel the privilege of knowing there would be an inestimable benefit to his daughter, who must often have longed for something different in the way of society from a battered old soldier like himself, more at home in camps than in courts; and while he hoped much for Caroline from such congenial intimacy, he could not disguise a kind of conviction that the acquaintance might prove mutually advantageous—"I mean merely to the young ladies, of course, one of whom is perhaps a little too confident, while the fault of the other," and he bowed to Aileen, "if fault indeed it be, is evidently a shy lack of self-confidence."

No matter how a dialogue begins, if one of the speakers is only sufficiently brave and persistent to flatter enough, it is sure to end well, always supposing there is a quite disinterested listener present. Neither of Major Wilton's listeners could be accounted altogether disinterested, and the dialogue between himself and Miss Simpson proceeded to an excellent conclusion, sometimes, indeed, quite merrily. After a time the theme shifted from Ashwater to persons they knew, or, more correctly, knew of. It was nice, the lady felt, to be discussing once again about familiar subjects on the well-remembered ground of yore.

Lady Jane and Lord John, the Countess of this and the Earl of that, flowed in smooth numbers from their lips. The Major was behind the scenes of high life; the latest scrap of information, the newest morsel of gossip, the raciest bit of scandal, the reason why the Honorable Miss Somebody did not go to Court, and why Mrs., who was not honorable did, were published in large type for him. By degrees Miss Simpson's face relaxed into an expression of benignant propriety, and softened as though she had resided in the gracious atmosphere of high life all her days, without thought of a salary or anxiety how to make the two ends meet.

She was like one who sits down to some unexpected feast after a long, long fast.

This was the sort of thing she had missed. How far, far superior Major Wilton's sayings and doings of the Upper Ten, even to that local gossip, she felt Aileen might indulge in with advantage. Nay, without disloyalty, she acknowledged that in some ways his chit-chat concerning great people was more captivating than Mr. Thomas Desborne's historical essays and genealogical trees.

There was the poetry of romance, flower and fruit, the stirring of the wind among green leaves, and the songs of birds sitting on the topmost boughs, in Major Wilton's discursive treatises, while Mr. Desborne's instructive statement read like the Roll of Caerlaverxock. It sounded delightful, and Miss Simpson felt she could have listened to the pleasant melody for an hour, had her visitor cared to stay so long.

Aileen listened too. It all seemed very strange to her, but no doubt the rippling music made by the flowing river of fashionable life had a certain interest for her also. Major Wilton talked familiarly of people, great and grand, just as she had heard, over and over again, Mrs. Fermoy gossip about people who were lowly and of no account.

She thought how odd it was to hear a person not above speaking to her, Aileen Fermoy, sitting in the same room, indeed, discoursing as confidently concerning the sayings and doings of the nobility as if he were their brother.

The girl never doubted that he was on terms of intimate friendship with them all. What a number of the aristocracy he knew. What a number of the aristocracy Miss Simpson knew likewise. In a vague way, it occurred to her that all this talk might be just as much history as that which Mr. Thomas Desborne had taught her to care for, while they were pacing the city byways together ; but she felt she liked the latter best, and was dreamily wondering why, and thinking she

would refer the question to her kind friend in Cloak Lane, when her attention was aroused by hearing Major Wilton say :

"I presume that Miss Fermoy, like my own dear girl, has not been presented yet."

"No—no, not yet," answered Miss Simpson, looking especially uncomfortable and coloring painfully.

"Money difficulties," remarked the Major, "have, with Caroline, stood in the way, and will continue to do so, I fear."

"There is no difficulty of that kind in Miss Fermoy's case," returned Miss Simpson.

"So I have been given to understand. Had Lady Penelope Hatcham lived, she would have acted as my daughter's godmother, but of course that is all now knocked on the head."

"Of course," said Miss Simpson, who knew Lady Penelope was gone where Court trains and feathers need trouble her mind never more.

"Really, it is a matter of little consequence, when married they can both make their courties. What a splendid thing it is to be young," added Major Wilton, in a little burst of sentimental regret.

"It is," agreed Miss Simpson, sighing for no reason in particular.

"With all the future to make or to mar," added Major Wilton, resolute not to let well alone.

"Too true," said Miss Simpson, pensively.

"And now, my dear lady, I really must be going," declared the Major, rising. "Oh! by the by, that reminds me, there was a little something I wanted to say—no, thank you, I won't sit down again. It was just this," and he stood in the middle of the room nursing his lackey hat and looking as utterly "a gentleman one would not wish to know," as can well be imagined, "it was just this. I gathered from my little girl—pardon me if I have made a mistake—that when Mr. and Mrs. Desborne come down here for the summer, you will have, in plain words, to turn out. Is that so?"

"It would not be convenient for us to remain on here," amended Miss Simpson, in her best manner.

"Precisely so, you know how to put it much better than I, but the result is the same. Well, what came into my mind was this: If those two ladies could make themselves comfortable in our little box, we should feel honored, and we need not lose the pleasure of their society. Carrie would do her best, I know, the place is small, but you would not be exacting. Will you consider the matter? Do."

"You are most kind," said Miss Simpson, "and I really feel unable to thank you as I ought, but it is quite arranged that when we leave here we return to Mr. Desborne's house in town."

"Oh! I see," returned Major Wilton, with an involuntary emphasis on the last word. "Well, no doubt our disappointment will be your gain. London, even London out of the season, will seem charming to your young friend. For myself, I always say, hail, rain or shine, give me London. The foggiest day in town is preferable to the most brilliant sunshine Teddington can offer. If anything *should* occur to change your plans, should the summer prove too warm and you wish for a breath of country air, remember Home-wood Lodge is always at your disposal. Regard it as your own, quite your own home," and with a hurried farewell the Major, as though unable to trust himself further, departed, leaving Miss Simpson, who, spite of her predilection for high life and fashionable gossip, was far from being a fool, to reflect very seriously on his proposal.

"No go," thought the visitor, as he walked toward his home, "better not have said anything about the matter, but how the deuce was I to know? Just like my luck! and there are those confounded Desbornes literally wallowing in wealth, making a pot of money out of that wench, while I can't see my way to a fiver. Well, they shan't have the course quite clear!"

It was no doubt in pursuance of this intention and,

since the ways of such men are indeed past finding out, in search no doubt, also of the five pound now so feelingly referred to, that after he had given his error of judgment "time to cool," Major Wilton began to take gallant officers, and young scions of noble houses to Ashwater with him.

He never personally conducted two at a time "round to Desbournes," if both were matrimonially inclined, but he had so many friends, and they dropped in from various points of the compass so frequently, that Miss Simpson got at last a little tired of receiving these unexpected visitors, and seriously thought of speaking to Thomas Desborne on the subject.

But no woman placed in such a position likes to acknowledge herself unequal to the trust, and as she could not see that anyone of the gentlemen who passed in review was recognized by Aileen as her ideal hero, she wisely held her peace and allowed the Major to come and go with his friends, none of whom seemed more impressed by the heiress than she seemed by them.

Though they might have been roughly divided into three classes, one that said "aw," another that said "ah," and a third that said, thoughtfully, "yes—yes—yes, yes, yes, yes," like a slow double knock, they had sense enough to see the Major's "good word" was not likely to carry them far into Miss Simpson's favor or the good graces of her charge, while, on the other hand, Aileen, even if one of their own rank, would not have attracted them.

They put the matter plainly and firmly to their host and declined a second call.

"No, thankee, it is more than I can stand," said one very candid youth.

"How I wish I were forty years younger," exclaimed the Major in disgust. "Question of a million going a-begging." For it is this, fortunes grow, though the possessor receives never a farthing of dividend on the added capital."

Meanwhile, the liking between Miss Wilton and Aileen struck root and flourished. Though they were opposite as the poles, though they had scarcely a thought in common, though they had been born in different ranks, and each a different way of looking, not merely over the broad field of life, but on the simplest trifles of their every-day experience they grew fond of each other.

To Aileen it seemed passing strange to own a girl friend, a lady, beautiful, accomplished, accustomed to the ways of society, learned in everything of which she was ignorant, while to Caroline Wilton, the simplicity, the honesty, the fearless truthfulness of this new acquaintance seemed nothing less than marvellous.

"If I had always known you," she said, one day, "I might have been good," and Aileen did not answer, "You are good," because she had more than a vague feeling that Miss Wilton was not anything of the sort. She only answered, "I have often been very cross and discontented," which was a nice way of getting out of the difficulty.

There were times when Aileen found the burden of this acquaintanceship heavy, when she found it impossible quite to keep silence about the past and hard to speak concerning her antecedents. With Miss Simpson this awkwardness had never arisen, because that lady perforce knew she came from the people, but Miss Wilton so politely and persistently treated her as though she had always been the possessor of ample means, embarrassing positions occasionally arose which it was necessary to face. As, for example, when Miss Wilton said it was stupid for them to address each other formally.

"Call me Carrie," she suggested, "and I will call you—no, I can't improve on Aileen. It is rather a mouthful to be sure, but a very sweet one."

There was a moment's silence, during which what Major Wilton gallantly styled the "wild rose leaf" color fluttered into Aileen's cheeks, then—

"Before you make such a friend of me, I think you ought to know who I am," answered the girl, in a low, but perfectly distinct voice.

"You are a dear, and that is enough for me," returned Miss Wilton, who was secretly dying to know all about the heiress's antecedents.

"My father was a butler, and my mother a lady's maid." For the first time in her life Aileen felt ashamed of stating what her parents' honest avocations had been, and felt ashamed because she was ashamed, for which reason probably she looked her companion very straight in the face and lifted her head a little proudly as she spoke.

"I am sure I should have loved your mother and respected your father," replied Miss Wilton, kissing the hot flushed face. "Aileen, you are a darling."

"They were so good, I did love them so much, I have been so lonely since they died," said Aileen, softly.

"My mother died when I was only a child," remarked Miss Wilton, who could not believe in anyone caring for her parents at all, but thought it was proper to make some remark. "I scarcely remember her. She must have been very glad to get out of this world and away from my dad, I should think. I wonder what made her marry him, for he was not young—fifty or thereabouts—and had no money."

"I know what made my father and mother marry," rejoined Aileen, "they loved one another."

"That is what you think you will marry for one of these days, I suppose—love——"

"Unless I do I shall not marry at all."

"Has Mr. Right come along yet?"

"No."

"Sure?"

"Quite sure."

"No one hidden in the bushes?"

"No one anywhere."

"If another girl told me that, I should believe she was telling me a tarradiddle."

"I am not."

This was natural enough talk, yet it made Aileen feel strangely older and younger at one and the same time, younger simply because it was natural, older for the reason that it put new ideas into her mind and filled her with a vague unrest.

Marriage might be for Miss Wilton, but for her never. She did not want to marry, yet all girls look forward half unconsciously to being wooed and wed. In all stations it is to them the fairy tale of life, and who that has loved would wish then to have the tale unread? All her early life Aileen had been too busy, too much oppressed with care, too anxious about the needs of to-morrow, too despondent concerning the tempers of to-day for indulgence in such fancies, but now, when she had nothing to occupy her long leisure, she could not help listening to the talk which went on concerning lovers and husbands, men who proposed and women who accepted engagements, trousseaux and weddings. Yes, it was all natural and pleasant enough, but not for her, it could never be for her. Because she knew well enough that if any fine gentleman came wooing, it would not be for love. Someone might wish for her money, but how could she care for any one who wanted only that.

She had learned many things, but the more she learned made her only the more certain, she could never become a lady. She might cease to be so awkward, she might grow a little less shy and afraid of the sound of her own voice, but she never could change herself, never be other than Aileen Fermoy, never be other than a very homely young woman who could no more be instructed in the mysteries of fashionable life than in the approved methods of improving her appearance.

She regarded Miss Wilton's aids to beauty with amazement, not to say fear.

"Do you think it is right?" she would timidly say, only to find her hesitating remonstrance checked by a peal of laughter and the reply.

"If all men had thought as you do we should still be wearing fig-leaves!"

For her, there would come no prince, no knight, no hero, no life companion! Such men as she had known in the old days she could never think of as lovers, and even if in the days which were present she saw anyone to be liked and admired, her liking and admiration must turn to contempt and aversion the moment he professed to care for her.

Since *that* could not be true, no gentleman might ever love her, and she knew it was better to remain single for life than to marry except for love and to be beloved.

All this while if she had looked with less critical eyes at her own reflection in the glass, she would have seen that she was daily improving in appearance.

No one could have wished the original Aileen to disappear, but a something previously overlaid with care and toil was coming quietly into sight.

Just as from the bare earth there emerges first one green shoot, and then another, so out of the dreariness of her gray past there sprang at last into sight leaf and bud and flower of beauty. Rest, peace and the association of those who had lived well and lain softly, and experienced that modest luxury the toiling poor know nothing of, were doing their gracious part. The hard lines anxiety had begun to trace were smoothed away, the harassed expression her face had too often worn was gone, time was hers to braid and coil that wealth of hair and dress well; if with the plainness she thought only fitting, her speech was more suitable to Shawn Fermoy's heiress than her former mode of address had been, she could understand topics of the day when people spoke about them, and take an interest in general conversation though she did not often join in it.

She made a fair picture as she sat with the early spring sunshine falling across the old world chronicles she delighted to read.

"Really, she is growing quite presentable," decided Miss Simpson, one fine Sunday afternoon, when the girl stood beside a window which overlooked the lawn.

Something in the turn of her head, in the restfulness of her quiet face, in the pose of her figure struck the older woman with a feeling of surprise.

"It is a long time since we have seen Mr. Thomas Desborne," she said, "I wonder if he will be down to-day."

The wish was father to the thought, but in addition to any personal feeling it crossed her mind that if one who remembered Aileen so well as she once was, could look at her, then, he would be more than satisfied.

"I hope he may come," answered Aileen, turning from the window. "Sunday always seems twice a Sunday when he spends it with us."

"He is indeed one in a thousand," agreed Miss Simpson, "but there is the bell. No doubt it is he."

It was not Mr. Thomas Desborne, however, but Major and Miss Wilton and General Van Berg, of whom Aileen had heard as an unwished-for suitor.

"My old friend is staying with us over Sunday," observed Major Wilton, "and I could not resist bringing him round to pay his respects to you and Miss Fermoy."

The General was short, stout, and sixty, only eleven years younger than his would-be father-in-law, and thirty-eight years older than the blooming creature he wished to marry. She looked lovelier than ever; her hair, a little blown about by the wind which had likewise deepened the usually delicate color in her cheeks to a rich damask. Her eyes were bright with excitement, and her speech and manner so vivacious as to suggest the idea that she wished to shock her elderly admirer.

Miss Simpson, always polite and always fond of visitors, welcomed the trio very cordially, found them comfortable chairs, made the usual remarks about the weather, the Thames, and the neighborhood, and had

just begun a treatise on the excellence of their clergyman and the especial eloquence of the sermon he preached that morning, at a service unhappily not patronized by Major Wilton and his daughter, for reasons connected with the General, when once again the door-bell woke every echo in Ashwater House.

"What visitor have we now?" asked the Major, who had the charming knack of making himself very much at home everywhere.

"I daresay it is Mr. Thomas Desborne," said Miss Simpson, mindful of Aileen's remark.

"Confound him!" thought Major Wilton, who often told his daughter he did not "think much" of the gentleman in question.

When Mr. Desborne, however, appeared, instead of his uncle, glorious summer weather instantly succeeded to the winter of this discontent.

"It is a privilege I have often desired," he said in his best manner.

"I am delighted," added Miss Wilton with her sweetest smile. "I have so long wished to know you, Mr. Desborne."

General Van Berg also, if he were to be believed, had passed a considerable period of his life in hoping the auspicious day might dawn which would witness his introduction to one he had so often heard spoken of in the highest terms.

By the time these amenities were happily ended, twilight was drawing on, and Miss Simpson thought tea would be a welcome diversion. Once more the visitors formed a charmed circle, and conversation, stimulated by Mr. Desborne's latest news from London, and "the cup which cheers," was in full progress when again the hall door-bell rang and Mr. Thomas Desborne walked in, accompanied by Philip Vernham.

"Why, what good wind has blown you here," asked Mr. Desborne, shaking the young man's hand cordially.

"We were at Hampton Court and thought we would

take Teddington on our way back," explained the other Mr. Desborne, answering his nephew's question.

"Great crush at the Palace, I suppose?" said Major Wilton.

"On the contrary, the rooms were almost empty. The Hampton Court season cannot be said to begin till Good Friday."

"Place I never go to," observed Major Wilton, with the air of a man giving his audience information, "awfully caddish."

"It is a place I delight in," returned Mr. Thomas Desborne, calmly.

"So do I," said Aileen, unable to resist the temptation of openly siding with her friend.

"So do *not* I," remarked Miss Wilton.

At sound of the girl's sweet incisive voice, Philip Vernham looked round quickly. The room was in partial darkness, being only lighted by some fitfully blazing logs. Miss Simpson cherished a fondness for the gloaming, perhaps because of its kindly shadows, and always deferred the evil hour of gas or lamps as long as possible, for which reason Mr. Vernham, till Miss Wilton spoke, only understood there was a third lady present, whether young or old he could not tell.

"Allow me to introduce Mr. Vernham to you, Miss Wilton," said Mr. Desborne, genially, the while the General took occasion to state:

"I am very partial to Hampton Court."

"Are you?" returned his lady love, after acknowledging with a distant inclination, Philip's formal bow.

"Yes, it is a grand old pile," answered her ancient admirer, valorously picking up the gage she flung down. "Many a pleasant hour I have spent there."

"Admiring the beauties, no doubt?"

"Monstrous fine women, many of them."

"Frights you mean," Miss Wilton suggested, contemptuously.

"Certainly not," returned the brave general.

"How they ever came to be painted, I can't conceive."

"It is a strange thing," observed Miss Wilton's admirer, addressing the company at large, "that no pretty woman can see any beauty in another woman, living or dead."

"Bet you a tenner," said the pretty woman who furnished the text for this well-worn platitude which she scorned to take any direct notice. "Bet you a tenner if the lot were on sale in some broker's shop, no person would be crazy enough to give five shillings for one of them."

"I won't bet with you again, young lady," retorted the General. "Last time we had a little affair on you refused to pay!"

He had the best of the argument for once. Miss Wilton did not answer. Whatever the nature of that wager might have been, she deemed it prudent to change the subject by asking Miss Simpson if she might light the lamps, for "talking in the dark is like dancing without music," she declared.

Three gentlemen rose to save her trouble, and as one of them for the first time saw her face clearly he felt fairly startled by its beauty.

"I think we must be going Carrie, my dear!" said her father, taking advantage of the general movement to approach Miss Simpson in order to say farewell.

That lady, however, would not hear of such desertion, and Mr. Desborne, never backward in proffering hospitality, seconded her invitation.

"You must stay for supper," he said. "We always have supper early on Sunday evening," and nothing loth Major Wilton, for self and friends, consented.

"Pleasantest meal in the day," he answered in polite acceptance, while the General, who would have stayed anywhere for any meal if a glass of decent wine loomed even in the remote distance, again assured Mr. Desborne that he felt delighted to make his acquaintance,

and was glad to avail himself of the opportunity for knowing more of him.

The Homewood Lodge party were all, in fact, so willing, and so glad, it was not until Mr. Thomas Desborne feared he must be thinking about the return train that the pleasant party broke up.

"Time and tide, you know, wait for no man, unfortunately," observed the lawyer, pleasantly.

"Quite true," answered Miss Wilton, as if he had addressed her especially, "though unfortunately many men have to wait for time and tide," at which retort there was a laugh, since people often laugh for very little reason, in which every one joined except Mr. Vernham, who had maintained a wise silence and a judge-like gravity throughout the evening.

"I wanted to speak to you," said Mr. Desborne in a hurried aside to Aileen, "but I will write," and then the guests gathered in the hall, cordial good-nights were exchanged, for a minute a bright light streamed out across the gravel and along the drive, then the door was shut, and Miss Simpson and Aileen returned to the now quiet drawing-room.

"What a pity, what a pity," said Miss Simpson as she reviewed Miss Wilton's alarmingly lively conversation. She had never before heard that young lady discoursing in a mixed company. "Poor girl, why does not some friend tell her how dreadful those slang phrases sound? How you can understand what she means quite baffles me. I never have heard you use such shocking expressions yourself, yet you seem to comprehend them without the slightest difficulty."

Then in no spirit of undue pride, Aileen explained that where she had formerly lived, not merely did "duffer," "screw," "cheek," "more side," "plenty of face," and many words of the same description, quite divorced from their original meaning, flourish like old-fashioned flowers and run riot by the way-side, but that Battersea might be depended on to furnish at a moment's notice all those choicer home and foreign

varieties of modern language of which the Universities and West End drawing-rooms are supposed to possess a monopoly. She made it clear to Miss Simpson's apprehension what Miss Wilton wished to convey by saying her father "need not jump at her," for calling him a "relieving officer," or remarking Sandown was not quite so "swagger" a race-course as Ascot.

"There are some who think it very funny," finished Aileen, "but I get tired of it, myself."

"Tired, I should think so," exclaimed Miss Simpson, indignantly. "It is not English, it is not Christian for any girl to make such an exhibition of herself. I felt quite ashamed to think Mr. Thomas Desborne should have heard her, and as for poor Mr. Vernham, I am certain he was utterly scandalized, and no wonder."

Whatever Mr. Thomas Desborne and poor Mr. Vernham may have thought about Miss Wilton's shortcomings, nothing was said on the subject till the two gentlemen were walking up Pilgrim Street on their way home.

Then the former asked, "How did Major Wilton and General Van Berg impress you?"

"They impressed me as the worst form possible," was the unhesitating reply.

"The girl is very beautiful."

There was just an instant's hesitation before Mr. Vernham answered, "very."

"It is a pity she is so slangy," went on Mr. Desborne, "but I am told all young ladies affect that sort of thing now."

"They may, I don't know, my acquaintance is very limited."

"Miss Wilton appears to be extremely amiable, however. She has taken our young friend Miss Fermoy in hand, and is teaching her what Miss Simpson could not, viz., music. That is, she has discovered the girl possesses a good voice and an

excellent ear and is instructing her to accompany herself."

"That is very kind," said Mr. Vernham. "I think I must leave you here. Good-night. Thank you for a most pleasant day."

CHAPTER XXII

CHAPTER XXII.

WANTED INFORMATION.

What Mr. Tovey wanted to know was how Mr. Desborne met those bills?

They were for a large amount, they were bills not at all in the ordinary course of business. Mr. Tovey quite understood the proceeds were required to fill some purely private gap which was yawning to an inconveniently wide extent; they were bills not made payable as ought to have been the case, at Mr. Desborne's bank, or office, or dwelling-house; they were bills to be ashamed of and kept secret; they were as things accursed, which no clerk, or servant, or relative, was to touch or even see; they were bills the drawer felt satisfied the acceptor would require his assistance to meet—yet the acceptor did not ask for such assistance!

Instead, he went in a hansom to Mr. Tovey's bank and "honored" the "nefarious documents" at the eleventh hour, it is true, but still a good fifty minutes before the stroke of doom.

Mr. Tovey, who chanced to be "hovering around," saw Mr. Desborne return through the swinging doors, and augured ill from the weary way he walked across the pavement, and his tired look as he directed the cabman where to drive next, but the bills were all right; they were not protested; they paid no fatal, if flying, visit to any notary; they never returned to the drawer with that significant inch of paper attached, the writing on which means ruin or the beginning of ruin, and is plain to the initiated as that legend Daniel interpreted for Belshazzar.

There were none of these things, and Mr. Tovey naturally wanted to know why.

Mr. Desborne could have told him, but Mr. Desborne did not, which perhaps was a pity, for Mr. Tovey, in spite of his many peculiarities, was not by any means a bad fellow, and he liked the lawyer. The lawyer, however, did not like him, and had made up his mind he would do anything and face anything rather than endure such another evening's "heckling" as that he experienced when his moneyed friend ate grapes and raised quite a cairn of filbert shells at Ashwater.

Few men can bear being "heckled" with equanimity, particularly when troubled about money matters, and though he was careful to conceal what he felt, Mr. Desborne grew at last to chafe under the most ordinary questioning, like a restive horse.

There were indeed times before and after those bills arrived at their full stature, when his uncle could scarcely put the simplest business to him without causing exquisite pain. The torments he passed through while Mr. Tovey's drafts were maturing no man suspected. All the while Care, that cunning sculptor, who works so much more thoroughly than Time, was graving indelible lines on his pleasant face. He met the world's scrutiny with a smile, and answered its greeting almost as cheerily as of old, but the man's heart was changed! The elasticity of his once happy, buoyant nature had left him to return never more. The amount of practical knowledge crowded into those three months by that merciless schoolmaster, Experience, could not be imagined save by the initiated. It is only those who have been "through the mill" who can tell how "exceedingly small" the stones grind; how every fibre, every nerve, is racked during the process.

Mr. Desborne soon grew to understand what the rack meant, if he never understood before. From the hour he signed his name across those drafts, his busi-

ness education—previously neglected—may be said to have begun.

First, he learned one truth never before suspected, though he ought to have been acquainted with it, namely, that money so raised goes no way at all ; and second, the absolute accuracy of Mr. Tovey's statement concerning the rapidity with which time travels while a bill is coming due.

It is a gracious provision of Providence that a sovereign earned will purchase about three times as much as a sovereign borrowed, and as to Time's rate of progression during the ninety-five days breathing space allowed to the unhappy debtor, why the speed of light was but dawdling by comparison.

Literally the days flew ; once there had been an interval between breakfast and luncheon, luncheon and dinner, but once he sold himself into captivity Mr. Desborne found there was no pause whatever.

Dull November went its way, the dark days before Christmas came, that merry season with its constant cry for money—money for needful tips, for presents, for superabundant feasting, for pale-faced flowers and prickly holly—fled by in turn, only to give place to a Happy New Year, inaugurated by heavy bills delivered, by respectful compliments, and requests for checks, and still time dashed on with the speed of an express train, and Mr. Desborne felt as though he had travelled hundreds and thousands of miles, when, suddenly, the first of February came, and he found himself almost at the terminus of the "three months after date" business, with nothing to meet his engagements.

It was then some leaden weight seemed to drop down in his heart with a heavy thud. From the first he knew this time must come, and now it had come.

On that November evening which, in spite of the frantic pace of Time's express, looked now to Mr. Desborne's memory so far and far away, what did he expect to happen that would enable him to keep faith with his

own signature? He had no idea whatever. Wonderful things do happen occasionally, but he could not remember at all why he then expected a miracle to be wrought for him.

If thoughts could have provided money for those bills they had been met over and over again, because, indeed, he may be said to have thought of nothing else for months. But thoughts are not actions, as the state of his exchequer proved. It is of no use for a man to lie awake at night forming plans unless he carry them out next day. It is worse than useless for him to start from troubled dreams if he fail to take such measures as shall prevent those dreams from becoming terrible realities.

He had been as one at sea without an oar or rudder, rushing to cry to this one and to that for help, and yet uttering never a sound; and now the rocks were within measurable distance, and he could do nothing to avert the impending catastrophe, unless he chose to take counsel with his uncle or Mr. Tovey. The latter had written a little memorandum, "Do not forget the 8th," just as if any human being so placed were likely to forget it. As well say to a man left for execution, "Do not forget Monday morning, when you are to be hung by the neck."

A natural instinct impelled him to reply irritably, but his legal instinct compelled him to be careful.

"I have not forgotten," was the compromise effected between the two. "I have not forgotten," which might mean he was still in possession of his faculties, but which certainly gave no assurance that he was in possession of the necessary amount of cash.

Mr. Tovey knew as well as anybody the ways and manners of individuals who rashly put pen to paper, particularly to stamped paper, read the four words of reply in this latter sense, and posted to Mr. Desborne's house a longer memorandum which contained a caution not to let the bills be dishonored. "If you are unable

to manage the full amount, come to me ; only do not drive matters off till the last minute."

It was like lashing a horse already wild with fright. Mr. Desborne scarcely knew what he was doing, but the well-meant suggestion only determined him to have no more dealings with Mr. Tovey. Perhaps had he seen his way to scrape together part of the amount, he might have been tempted by so insidious an offer ; but not having a penny in hand or any proposal to make, he no doubt felt he might, in vulgar parlance, as well be hung for a cow as a calf.

If he had to go to his uncle Mr. Tovey's assistance would be unnecessary ; if he did not go to his uncle any partial renewals could serve no purpose whatever. For these and other reasons he took no notice of Mr. Tovey's latest note, only answering it by a dignified silence, which induced his creditor to expect the worst.

And all this time Mr. Desborne was suffering torments, in comparison with which lakes of fire and brimstone seemed to him mere child's play.

He was learning the full meaning of bills payable ; he was more than beginning to understand the agonies those struggling men must have endured whom he had seen in the days of his own prosperity rushing into banks while the hands of the clock were travelling toward the stroke of four, and paying in their hardly-gathered money, only that they might secure the doubtful privilege of carrying on a losing game for some few toilsome months or years longer. Vaguely, too, it was borne in upon him how hard it is for a capitalist to remain a lenient creditor. The business man who does not insist on his pound of flesh is very likely ere long to have no pound of flesh to insist on ; while as for money-lenders, Mr. Desborne felt that if those gentlemen could only be induced not to ask so many questions an intending borrower who knew anything of the difficulty of repayment might forgive them for not lending at all.

From experience further he was becoming acquainted with the torments of Tantalus. Fair fruit and sparkling waters were within his reach, yet he dare not slake his thirst with the one nor stretch forth his hand to pluck the other.

In the bank with which Desborne & Son kept the firm's account there were thousands of pounds lying quite idle. A heavy mortgage had been paid off some time previously, and the amount left in safe custody till such time as the owner might request it to be forwarded to him, an event likely to happen any day. There, however, meantime it remained, making the firm's balance exceptionally heavy, and causing the head of that firm to feel certain there existed in the mode of distributing wealth some tremendous injustice.

Perhaps it was thinking about the sum of money Desborne & Son's bankers were probably turning over and over again with much profit to themselves which made Mr. Desborne wonder whether his own private bankers could assist him in his need. He had not much security to offer, but perhaps gentlemen with whom his father and grandfather had done business might regard his request favorably and refrain from impertinent questioning and disagreeable comment.

That certainly was a notion worth considering; unhappily, however, it was one which the more Mr. Desborne considered the less he felt inclined to carry out.

There was so many things against it; first, he must tell his bankers he was short of money; next the state of his account, long drawn so close that if replenished one week it looked weak and poverty-stricken a fortnight after—a terribly shaky account, so shaky no banker in his senses could be expected to strengthen it with a loan. Preferring such a request might also damage his credit, and draw attention to the state of his affairs. No, that would not do, and yet what was he to do?

He must ask some one ; he could but be refused. After being refused he might go to his uncle. A few hours more and the three months, which in prospect had seemed so long, would have vanished utterly, and the three days of grace only be left? What was it possible to do in three days?

With a heavy heart he involuntarily worked out this rule-of-three sum. Given that in ninety-two days he had not been able to provide for even one of the bills, what likelihood was there of his finding funds to meet all of them in three?

To an impecunious man there is no science so de testable as arithmetic, and Mr. Desborne while vainly striving to make two and two three or five, as the case might be, had long felt he hated it with all his soul.

Hating or liking would not, however, help him to solve the problem of how to get money.

"I will go to my bankers," he decided, "they can but say 'No,' " and, indeed, there was nothing more sure than they would say "No," but still even the shadow of hope that they might answer "Yes" seemed such a comfort. Mr. Desborne feared to put his fortune to the test and leave himself no alternative save an interview with his uncle. On the whole, he thought he would rather let any amount of dishonor be heaped on those wretched bills and leave Mr. Tovey to do his worst, but he could not exactly forecast what that worst might prove, and felt that if he had to go to his bankers at last he had better adopt that disagreeable course at first. "I *will* go to them," he repeated, with greater emphasis than before, "this afternoon."

With the afternoon, however, came another excuse for further delay. "I shall be fresher in the morning," he thought. "Having made up my mind as to what I am going to do, perhaps I shall sleep better to-night. Yes, I will leave the matter over till to-morrow, and call at the bank on my way to Cloak Lane."

Morning found him no more inclined for the interview he had overnight so firmly determined to seek, than the previous afternoon had done.

"I may as well just call in at the office first," he said to himself, "and then I can devote myself to the business in hand."

If the business so glibly referred to meant that impending interview it was destined never to take place.

At Messrs. Desborne & Son's the custom prevailed of leaving all letters for the firm, as well as for Mr. Thomas Desborne, on that gentleman's table, while those addressed to his nephew were carried into the room memorable to Aileen as the scene of her first interview.

It was not because he expected any important communication that the Head of the Firm bent his steps to Cloak Lane and entered his office before going on to his bank. All he wanted was to delay the evil hour, and, influenced by this desire, he turned over his letters and proceeded to read them leisurely.

He had thus worked his way almost to the end, when he drew from its envelope one enclosure, the contents of which caused the hot blood to rush into his face and immediately after fade away leaving him pale as death.

For a moment the writing grew blurred and indistinct before his eyes, there sounded a strange humming in his ears, something seemed to come between him and the light of day, he felt as though the room were reeling round, then the sudden faintness passed off and he knew he was sitting in his accustomed place with a number of letters before him, the cold February sunshine falling across the carpet and regilding the lettering of his law books.

Filling a glass with water he emptied it at a draught, after which he remained for a while with his elbows resting on the table and his hands supporting his head, trying, as Mr. Tripsdale would have jauntily said, "to pull himself together."

When he had done this to a certain extent and glanced over the few remaining letters, he put them all on one side with the exception of that short epistle which had produced such an effect.

This he scanned again before taking it upstairs to his uncle's room.

He found Mr. Thomas Desborne very busy with his correspondence, making abstracts, penciling notes, instructing Mr. Knevitt—so busy, indeed, that he did not look up while answering his nephew's good-morning, but merely pushed some folios toward him, adding, "I wish you would give these matters your attention to-day."

"Certainly," answered Mr. Desborne, making a desperate effort to "pull himself more together," and then he laid the paper he carried before his uncle, observing, "that has just come."

Mr. Thomas Desborne read the memorandum, for it was little more, without the smallest evidence of feeling. It did not affect him in the least, indeed there was not the slightest reason why it should have done so.

"Very well!" was his tranquil comment as he pushed the communication back to his nephew. "Is it worth while placing the amount on deposit?"

"I think not," said Mr. Desborne. "At all events we may as well leave that over till after I have seen him. You see he will be passing through London in a few days."

"True, things had better remain as they are."

Mr. Desborne went down-stairs again and shut himself up with the folios, to which he tried to give his best attention. Quite unsuccessfully, however, for Mr. Tovey's bills played at leap-frog over the text and scrawled "Three months after date" in mighty letters across the clear, formal writing, which purported to set forth how, on a certain day in a certain year of grace, John Jones in consideration of, and all the rest of it, "undertook for himself, his heirs, and assigns, etc."

"I must go out and get my brain cleared," thought

Mr. Desborne as "value received," which had nothing in the world to do with John Jones, took a header over "accepted payable" and came down flat on "to Edward Desborne, Esq., Ashwater, Teddington."

"This is enough to drive a man mad."

Accordingly he went out and took a cheerful walk about the network of lanes that at one time ran direct from Cannon Street to Thames Street, but are now dissected by Queen Victoria Street and the Daylight Route Railway. He came, in the course of his travels, as people who roam without a purpose anywhere in London are sure to do, upon yards and courts and funny out-of-the-way little nooks strange and unfamiliar; he got to the backs of accustomed churches; he saw little shops crushed into unexpected corners; he found where beadles lived, and where the inhabitants were informed they ought to apply in case of fire. He beheld grimy children and little girls in clean white pinafores, and grew interested and forgot, for the time being, why he was making such a pilgrimage, and the fact that a person of the name of Tovey existed and was very much in evidence. When he got to St. Mary Somerset, of which church he had to ask the name, so ignorant was he of most matters appertaining to the city lying out of his ordinary routine, a dim recollection recurred to him of having when a lad attended service with his uncle, who afterward took him along many streets, alleys, and hills in search of lanes which no longer existed, having been swept out of the way and off the maps by the besom of civilization.

He could remember him standing at one particular point and saying: "It was just about here Desborne Lane started, running south to Thames Street, and I feel little doubt, though the old histories are silent on the subject, that one of our ancestors lived in a fair house near this. So late as seventeen hundred and ninety Lambert Hill was inhabited by private families, but we probably were driven from our home at the time of the great fire, when the old churches of St.

Nicholas, Cole Abbey, and St. Michael, Queenhithe, were destroyed, as well as the residences of many persons of wealth and consideration."

Across the past came faint but clear the echoes from that long-ago time; on that spot they had stayed, as words breathed into a telephone and sealed up will remain for long till called on to give up their sound to ears that can never hear them as they would have heard them once, and now Mr. Desborne listened to those strange echoes with a feeling of pain which was well-nigh unendurable. He had been a boy then and his uncle a comparatively young man, and now—and now if Mr. Thomas Desborne knew of the straits to which the last of his line was reduced it would break his heart and humble his pride into the dust.

"He must never know, never"—and Mr. Desborne, from out whose breast for a few minutes seven devils had been cast, hurried on with a legion tearing and tormenting him.

"Why, what are you doing in these remote wilds?" asked a voice at his elbow. "Coming to see me?"

"Well, no," answered the other, as he shook the hand of a cheery, pleasant-faced man with great cordiality. "The fact is——"

"Never mind what the fact is, as you are here come along to my diggings and tell me all the news. Why, it is an age since I've seen you—two years next Easter. You are not looking yourself. What's the matter?"

"Bit of cold; overworked a little, too."

"Oh! I dare say!"

"It is the case, Tranmere. These are times when the laziest of us must give helping hand to push the business cart along."

"I did not think you would have given that helping hand, though."

"And why?"

"Because there is no need; you are beyond the world, and are not one to cotton to work—real work, I mean."

"I don't know; as a man grows older I fancy he begins to like business rather than otherwise."

"It does not agree with you, then, for you are not looking well."

They turned into a house in Knightrider Street, which so far progress had spared, excepting to convert from a dwelling into offices. It was not a mansion or picturesque, but Mr. Desborne liked the easy tread of the stairs and the broad balustrade, and the oak balusters blackened with age, and the deep window-seats in which children had hidden themselves behind the curtains and lovers had pledged their vows. Not a very old house, yet old enough to have passed through all sorts of changes. It had been inhabited by families of medium class, and afterward let out as offices; then it was changed into a shop, and, last of all, some one took the place who used the ground floor as a warehouse and the first floor for a light manufacturing business, and let the second floor to Mr. Tranmere, and the third to a vellum binder, for the lease was nearly out, and when it expired the building would be pulled down and improved off the face of the earth, pending which final disappearance the question was to get as much rent as possible out of the rooms with their oak floors and low ceilings and smoke-stained wooden chimney-pieces, ornamented by trailing garlands and flowers and fat cupids blowing impossible horns.

Mr. Tranmere placed a chair beside the battered office-table and asked his visitor to be seated. All the furniture looked as though it had been bought at different periods from the refuse of some broker's stock. The floor-covering was a mere strip taken apparently off some immense Turkey carpet that had done good service at aldermanic feasts, the leather on the table was worn and hacked, the many mahogany chairs were of various patterns and in divers degrees of dilapidation; there was nothing modern in the room save a handsome envelope case and a substantial safe,

from out of which Mr. Tranmere produced a decanter and two wineglasses.

"You won't get such Madeira as this every day, let you pay what price you like," he remarked, as he poured out the wine. "Drink that up, it will do you good; there is not a headache in a hogshead."

"You were always a rare judge of wine, Tranmere."

"Ah! you are thinking of that old brown sherry. That was a sherry if you like! and till old Conister dies I don't know where any one will get its equal."

"Who is old Conister, and why must the world wait until his decease for super-excellent brown sherry?"

"Old Conister made half a million of money out of turkey-red cotton handkerchiefs, and the best old-fashioned wines in England are in his cellars at Great Geris. If you want good wine or good pictures you must go to the East of London. When a city man knows anything he knows more than most people, and when he is a judge at all his judgments may be depended upon."

Mr. Tranmere was not, perhaps, exactly the person whom one would have invited to meet lords and dukes and princes of the blood at a select party, but a heartier, simpler, pleasanter, better fellow never came to business at nine o'clock every working morning. He had no fads, no ambitions, no crazes, no injuries. He took the world as he found it, and for the most part he found it very good.

He felt no wild desire to undertake the task of reforming human nature. He did not bore people about his misfortunes or his triumphs. He was not swift to take offences or given to meet trouble half way. He never asked impertinent or fishing questions, and no person need have feared writing or speaking freely to him, because, as he explained, "I burn all letters except those which concern my own business, and I never talk about affairs that have nothing to do with me."

In his then state of mind Mr. Desborne felt it was a distinct comfort to sit for even a few minutes in

that quiet room and look at his host's ruddy, honest face.

"How are you getting on?" he asked, knowing quite well the reply would be satisfactory.

"As usual," Mr. Tranmere answered, laughingly. "I am not making a spoon, but on the other hand I am not spoiling a horn. I have never prayed Agur's prayer, and yet his petition has been granted to me. Vanity is far enough removed from my path, I am not rich, but, on the other hand, I am not afraid that I shall die in the workhouse, as I might have done had I got what I at one time wanted."

"Would it be intrusive——?"

"To ask what I did want," finished Mr. Tranmere. "Not in the least; I wanted a wife, and a particular girl to be my wife. Happily she saw matters differently, and said 'No.' Her refusal cut me up a good deal at the time. I thought life, after a fashion, was ended for me, but a friend advised a sea voyage, and when I came back again I found my heart was not broke, and that she was married to a man whom she has twice landed in the bankruptcy court. I never could have kept my head above water if she had said 'Yes.'"

Mr. Desborne made no comment, but considered how passing strange it is that the simplest conversation should have such a knack of fitting itself to the inmost thoughts of those who are conversing. Start talk how one will it has the power of veering round to the subject most to be avoided. Extravagant wives who led their husbands into difficulties was a theme not much to his taste. He would break fresh ground.

"Is that nice young clerk whom you liked so much still with you?" he asked, casting about for something to say.

"No, he discharged himself."

"How was that?"

"He did not like London, or rather London did not like him. He was far too fond of practical jokes. He

played off one, the humor of which was not exactly appreciated."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, he accepted a bill."

"Surely not a very heinous offence," said Mr. Desborne, inwardly wondering whether he was ever to get rid of such detested topics.

"In an ordinary way perhaps not, but he forgot to sign his own name; that was where the humor came in."

"How could he accept a bill without signing his own name?"

"By writing that of another person."

"Do you mean he committed forgery?"

"The other person said so, and the drawer and the bank said so; as for the young fellow himself, he declared he meant no harm."

"Was the other person yourself?" inquired Mr. Desborne.

"Oh! dear no, the squire of the village, who did not consider the matter at all humorous. My young man declared the whole thing was a lark, and when I pointed out that such larks laid straight to the Old Bailey, turned sulky, and said he would leave then and there, which he did, after debiting himself with three pounds taken without my consent out of petty cash for travelling expenses. If there had been more than three pounds in the cash box I have no doubt he would have debited himself with a larger sum. To employ his own phrase—he was strictly correct in his accounts."

Mr. Desborne did not laugh; on the contrary, he looked very grave, indeed. To his legal mind, the criminal nature of such an offence presented itself in a strong light.

"How did it all end?" he asked.

The friends came forward and paid the amount. The squire was appeased and the bank had no interest in the matter. I got my three pounds, and a note from my late clerk saying he was going to Australia, and

asking for a letter of introduction to a correspondent of mine in Melbourne."

"And what did you do?"

"Oh! I sent him the letter, but I wrote privately to my friend telling the whole story and saying if he put neither silver nor gold in my late clerk's way and debarred him from the use of pen and ink, he might turn out a useful member of society. You see, one must give a fellow the chance of reforming. He may do well enough in a new country among strange people. Have another glass of wine——do——"

"No, thank you," said Mr. Desborne, rising. He felt he had had enough of everything in that room. A whole butt of Madeira would not have sufficed to drown the memory of Mr. Tranmere's talk!

He took the most direct route back to Cloak Lane, and compelled himself to work for a couple of hours. Then he went out and had some luncheon, then returned to his office, saw a few clients, wrote half a dozen letters, drew out his cheque-book and looked at it, replaced it in the safe, went upstairs and talked for a little while with his uncle before going home. A day fully employed with the exception of that hour when he strolled through the wood of Queenhithe and tried unavailingly to find the waters of Lethe in Knightrider Street; a day so fully employed that he never found time to go to his bankers, never thought of going to them, in fact.

The second day of grace was passed much as the first had been, save that Mr. Desborne did not go wandering and confined his sole excursion to Chancery Lane where he had an appointment.

At noon he took out his cheque-book and returned it again to the safe unused, as he had done on the previous afternoon.

After bank hours he again brought it to light with great care, filled in a cheque, which, however, he did not tear from the book till the third day came, when about two o'clock he called Mr. Tripsdale into his

office and despatched that young gentleman to get the draft cashed.

"Now," said the Head of the Firm, when Mr. Tripsdale returned, "take the number of these notes, put them in this envelope, and bring them back to me."

"What are you doing?" asked Mr. Puckle, curiously, when he saw his fellow clerk's employment. "Oh! for Humphrey Dayfeld, Esq., Limmer's Hotel," he added, laying down the envelope he had taken up.

"Let my things alone, confound you," said Mr. Tripsdale, indignantly. "There now, I will have to count those notes all again."

He counted them all again, Mr. Puckle kindly keeping tally with him and put them in their cover, which he took into Mr. Desborne's office.

"Call me a cab, will you?" requested his employer, and Mr. Tripsdale, walking very erect as a sort of dignified protest at being asked to perform such an unworthy errand, went on his way and personally conducted a hansom to the door. If Mr. Puckle had been sent for a cab, he would have jumped in and let the man drive him back. Not so the younger clerk.

"I am not going to ride as if I were a messenger," he soliloquized, and for this reason he stalked along solemnly to the amazement of "cabby," who decided the "little chap" was "a rum 'un."

It was on that same afternoon Mr. Tovey saw Mr. Desborne as he returned from taking up those bills.

"I thought he would have required help from me," said the former to himself, when he found the acceptance were honored. "It is a large sum for a man to find, more especially a man who must have been so hard up three months ago. I wonder how he managed to do it."

Mr. Desborne, as has already been remarked, could have told him, but Mr. Desborne did not. He did not tell any one, only stuck to business as he had never in all his life done before. Was it too late, he asked himself, to regain the fine connection formerly pos-

sessed by his firm—to recover the splendid prestige which had once hung about its name? He could not tell, but he meant to try.

Spite of the eternal struggle life had become, spite of the weary oppression which weighed him down, he would try. If sticking to business were indeed able to compass security, he must soon be out of debt, but who can fill a pitcher which leaks, unless he first stop the leak? This was a problem Mr. Desborne had not yet set himself to solve. This was a conundrum still to be answered.

“Edward,” said his uncle one day about a month later, “how could you be so careless as to give Mr. Dayfeld a check, and for such a large amount, payable to bearer, without ever crossing it?”

“That is all right,” was the answer, “cash was wanted, and I drew the money out and paid it over myself.”

“And took a receipt, I hope?”

“Of course.”

“It is a way of doing business that I do not much like; but still, why could he not have passed the check through his bank?”

“I really cannot tell you.”

Mr. Edward Desborne's tone sounded as though he were a little vexed.

Probably he felt he might as well not be Head of the Firm if his uncle wanted such an unreasonable amount of information.

CHAPTER XXIII.

MRS. DESBORNE'S DESIRE.

"I made you 'sit up' on Sunday, didn't I, Miss Simpson?"

It was Miss Wilton who asked this audacious question—Miss Wilton, who had almost caused Miss Simpson's hair to stand on end, and who, looking lovelier than ever, now lay back in an easy chair, her arms thrown up, and her hands supporting her head, looking the very incarnation of roguish impropriety.

By virtue of her office as the guide and director of untrained youth, Miss Simpson would like to have told the young lady to sit up in a different sense, pull down her dress, and modestly hide her pretty feet, which were crossed and well in evidence, and, indeed, were too small and well-formed for their owner to care to conceal very sedulously; but Miss Wilton was not in Miss Simpson's charge, and if she had been would most probably only have laughed at the mandate, and adopted an even more indolent attitude.

"Made me—?" repeated the poor lady, helplessly. She felt sure if any one needed to receive a hint about holding herself erect, that person was Miss Wilton.

"I mean I amazed you a little."

"More than a little, my dear, it grieved me deeply to hear you talking as you did."

"Why?"

"Well, for one reason, because I have hitherto been accustomed to hear young ladies converse in English."

"I did converse in English, modern English, which bears the same relation to that of your time as the

English of fifty years ago did to the pathos, say, of Chaucer."

"My dear—my dear——"

"What is the matter now? Do you mean to say I am not to use the language of my period, of my environment? Absurd!"

"Is the language of your period unintelligible slang?"

"Not unintelligible and not slang, Miss Simpson. Slang is defined by the united wisdom of nine, if not more, eminent lexicographers boiled down by one P. A. Nuttall, LL.D., to be something vulgar and unmeaning. Now, that can't be vulgar which is in use among the highest in the land, and that the new language is not unmeaning is proved by the fact of every one understanding it."

"I fail to do so."

"Then you are the exception which proves the rule. Besides, it is only for want of proper instruction that you remain ignorant. When I have been teaching you for a few months longer the strange language will be plain to you as a first primer. No doubt you boggled a little over A B C when you were a child."

Miss Simpson was forced to relax. "You are a naughty girl!" she said, "and I ought to give you a good scolding."

"We will take that as read," answered Miss Wilton.

"Seriously, I felt quite ashamed to think you should talk as you did before all those gentlemen, just when I wanted you to be on your best behavior, too."

"They liked it."

"Oh! no, they did not."

"Then their looks belied their thoughts."

"No man likes an unfeminine woman."

"You dear old thing! I am not unfeminine; I am only modern. I am of my time, up to date, in fact."

"Of course, I know nothing," said Miss Simpson, in an offended tone—the smallest reference to age hurt her even more than slang.

"Candidly, I don't think you know much of the present time. Things have gone on a little since your bread-and-butter days. Girls are not now expected to sit mute and listen to their elders talking nonsense."

"At all events, they do not," interrupted Miss Simpson. "Ah! the manners of young people were very different once."

"They were as I tell you ; we have gone on ; things are so much better managed all round than they were formerly ; everything is easier, nicer, less formal. Only consider how society has veered round in its opinions, and it will go on veering. Not so long ago there was an idea no woman could venture out in public unless escorted by a man. Before many years are over, I expect it won't be considered proper for a man to go abroad without a woman to take care of him !"

"You may talk as you like, but gentlemen do not like that sort of thing."

"What sort of thing? and when that is all settled, how do you know? Has any gentleman told you what he likes?"

"I know what Mr. Thomas Desborne likes?"

"Do tell me ; I should love to hear the opinions of an antediluvian."

"I must decline to continue the conversation further," said Miss Simpson, rising and preparing to leave the room. "I honor and respect Mr. Thomas Desborne more than I can say, and it is impossible for me to remain where he is spoken of in such terms."

"Such terms!" cried Miss Wilton, starting up and barring Miss Simpson's progress to the door ; "why, antediluvian is the modern synonym for everything that is most charming and attractive in the human being. Do not go away, please ; I would rather be hung, drawn, and quartered than say one depreciating word about Mr. Thomas Desborne, who is quite a darling. Indeed I love him more than his nephew, and ever so much better than Aileen's prime favorite, Mr. Vernham, who looked glum enough to throw a gloom over

any festival. If it had not been for him we should have spent a high old time on Sunday night."

"Don't speak against Mr. Vernham," entreated Aileen. "He has been the kindest friend I ever had, or ever shall have."

"Dear me! who am I to talk against, then?" asked Miss Wilton. "As some one said, I seem quite unable to open my mouth without putting my foot in it."

"Suppose you do not talk against any one," suggested Miss Simpson. "It is a bad habit, to say the least; how should you like if we began to criticize your friends and pull them to pieces?"

"My dear Miss Simpson," returned the girl with effusion, "you may begin and pull every friend I have in the world to pieces at once. I give you free and full permission. I shall enjoy the fun! Do not look so shocked. I am not going to talk treason about any one in your good books for the future, though I confess on Sunday I did think I should like to see Aileen's solemn Mr. Vernham come a downer."

"What is a downer?" asked Miss Simpson, aghast.

"A cropper, if you prefer that reading. Now, let us kiss all around the maypole and make up friends, and on the occasion of the next Sunday visitation you shall see how proper and straight-laced and niminy-piminy I can be."

"Oh, my dear," said Miss Simpson, as she kissed the sweet lips presented to her, "you must not be vexed with me. It is for your own good I speak. You are so pretty and so charming, and——"

"Don't make me blush," entreated Miss Wilton. "Come, Aileen, it's your turn. Hillo! who have we here?"

"Where?" asked Miss Simpson.

"I see a carriage coming along the drive—only a fly, I vow and protest, isn't that the correct style, sort of little oath our poor great-grandmothers indulged in. Tompkins' fly from the station with Tompkins himself as charioteer."

"Who can it be?" exclaimed Miss Simpson all in a flurry.

"Don't be alarmed, my dear lady, I will stay and see you through it. Sit down and let me fan you."

"Be quiet, you ridiculous child," said Miss Simpson, putting aside the newspaper with which the girl would have fanned her. "How long Susan is in answering the bell. Oh! she is opening the door now—why—it is—it is Mrs. Desborne."

It was Mrs. Desborne who came into the room, shook hands with Miss Simpson, and bowed to Miss Wilton and Aileen, even before the Major's daughter was introduced to her.

"I am so glad to find you in," she said to Miss Simpson without any further remark, "as I wish to return by the next train."

"May I not order some luncheon?" asked Miss Simpson.

"Nothing, thank you; I only want a few minutes' conversation."

The two girls understood this to mean she wanted a few minutes' conversation in private. They slipped quietly out of the room and made their way down to the river.

"I will tell you why I am here at once," began Mrs. Desborne, when she and Miss Simpson were left alone, sinking into the chair Miss Wilton had lately occupied. "The Survilles return from their honeymoon next Monday, and will be staying with us for nearly a week. It is impossible for me to play the hostess and act as housekeeper as well, and I want you to help me."

"In what way?" asked the other.

"Why, you stupid creature, there is only one way in which you can help—by coming up and seeing to the things for me. Will you do this?"

Miss Simpson paused; she knew perfectly well what she wanted to say, but she did not know exactly how to say it, for which reason, putting off the evil hour of full explanation, she answered:

"I scarcely see how I——"

"Now, for mercy's sake, don't begin to make objections. I have quite troubles enough at present without your adding to them."

"I should be very sorry indeed to do so," answered Miss Simpson, who knew from former experience that Mrs. Desborne's mountains were all molehills; "but what I must say is that I am at present Miss Fermoy's companion. I do not see how I can leave her."

"Not even for a few days?"

"Not even for a few days."

Mrs. Desborne bit her lip. She was not accustomed to be thwarted, and Miss Simpson's reply seemed to her little short of rebellion, not to say treason.

"You must remember," she said, "that but for me you never would have secured your present situation."

"I am not unmindful of your kindness. I never have been," answered Miss Simpson, ambiguously.

"Do you know what the girl's parents were?"

"You were good enough to inform me in your first note."

"And do you mean to tell me a girl of her class may not be left to take care of herself for the short time I wish you to come to town?"

"I mean to say that so long as Miss Fermoy chooses to retain my services, I shall treat her in every respect as I would were she the daughter of a peer."

For a few moments there ensued silence, during which Mrs. Desborne digested Miss Simpson's speech. It was not a nice speech, she thought. It was one that conveyed much more than the actual words spoken might seem to imply.

Mrs. Desborne knew Miss Simpson quite as well as Miss Simpson knew Mrs. Desborne. Many a battle they had fought in the old days departed, and the Governess always came out the winner. She won now.

"It is very annoying," said Mrs. Desborne; but "if you will not come without the tiresome girl she must

come with you, I suppose. Does that concession seem satisfactory?"

"On those terms I am quite willing to do what you ask."

"If she consent to the arrangement, I suppose?" suggested Mrs. Desborne, with a sneer.

"She will consent," replied Miss Simpson, calmly; "there never existed any one more ready to oblige."

"Remember, you just keep her out of my way," said Mrs. Desborne in a smoldering rage.

"Allow me to make all arrangements, and you shall not even see her."

"Well, that is a comfort at all events," was the rejoinder. "I certainly do not wish to introduce Mr. Desborne's distinguished client to my cousin and Captain Surville."

"You need have no apprehension on that score. When do you wish me to come?"

"On Saturday, if you will. Everything is a little uncomfortable in the house, and every one is more than a little out of temper. I have never known Mr. Desborne so tiresome since I married him. He is constantly saying the expenses are too heavy, which is quite ridiculous, you know, because the expenses are no heavier than they always were."

"It is simply absurd," went on Mrs. Desborne, finding Miss Simpson preserved a discreet silence, "a house cannot be kept up for nothing."

"That is self-evident," said Miss Simpson, "and neither can two."

"I never wanted a second house," declared Mrs. Desborne, warmly. "I am perfectly satisfied to take a furnished place every summer. It was certainly Mr. Desborne's wish to buy Ashwater. When he was grumbling about some bills the other day, and declaring he could not afford this and that, I asked him to sell this place or let it, and what do you suppose he said?"

"Something sensible, no doubt."

"Something idiotic, you mean. He said he would like to sell the house in town and make our permanent home here. Now, just fancy making a permanent home at Teddington. 'Never,' I told him. He may live where he pleases, but he will never get me to make a home out of London. I should be very glad if he would sell that stupid little house, however, and buy one in some accessible part of London. If he names the matter to you, do suggest that to him."

"I make it a rule never to take sides whether with husband or wife," answered Miss Simpson.

"You make it a rule, apparently, to do nothing you are asked," retorted Mrs. Desborne.

"You know it is useless trying to quarrel with me," observed Miss Simpson.

"I have no desire to quarrel with you. I only want you to see things as they are. Is it reasonable, I ask, for Mr. Desborne to say our petty household costs too much."

"That depends, I should say."

"Depends on what?"

"How much it does cost?"

"Good gracious, you know how simply we live. As for me, I spend nothing—literally nothing. It is not my fault that the bills run up. You know what tradesmen are, and what servants are. As I said the other evening, 'If you felt so dissatisfied, you had better manage the house yourself.' When I married a business man, I thought at least I was marrying one who would give me plenty of money, but I have never had a carriage or men servants or any luxury whatever. And it is so absurd because Mr. Desborne must be making a huge income, and we know at his uncle's death he will come into a large fortune."

"Mr. Thomas Desborne is still comparatively a young man."

"He is sixty-six, and he has been saving for nearly forty years," was the reply. "If there were no money I should not say a word, though I should feel I had

been very badly treated, grossly deceived in fact, but when such a fuss is made about nothing I confess it tries me. Will you come up stairs? I want some things sent to town and can show you what they are. Oh! and Woodward must manage to let me have quantities of flowers, not the wretched supplies he seems to imagine sufficient. Mr. Desborne says florist's charges are enormous. Speak about this, will you? and see that a large hamper is despatched on Friday."

From all of which remarks and commands, Miss Simpson gathered that Mrs. Desborne had inherited the Harlingford talent for spending money and getting nothing in return.

Matters must have gone very far, she knew, when Mr. Desborne was moved to speech, and indeed though he had said nothing stronger than "Don't you think, my love, two guineas is too much to charge for a bouquet?" and "It seems to me, Emily, the tradespeople cannot possibly be correct in their accounts," such mild remonstrances had cost him more to utter than it would another man to have carried a fiery cross from cellar to attic, and struck wild terror into the hearts of domestics and mistress.

The trouble had begun the poor lady felt; when would it end? She who had known poverty herself, who had suffered many things at the hands of the Harlingfords, who comprehended them root and branch, who had received nothing but kindness from the Desbornes, who had reason to be grateful to them, and who was grateful, could not contemplate the situation without a secret dread, none the less strong because undefined.

"And to think of her talking in that cold-blooded way about dear Mr. Thomas Desborne. She would not care if everyone in the world were dead, so long as she could get what she wanted herself!"

This was Miss Simpson's view of Mrs. Desborne, while Aileen's was of reverent admiration. To her Mrs. Desborne seemed the embodiment of everything

most perfect in what she mentally called "a lady born." Mr. Desborne himself did not think more highly of his wife than this girl, who considered there had never before been anyone like her—so beautiful, so graceful, so regal; the very sound of her voice was delightful to Aileen, and the rustle of her rich dress sweet as some pleasant melody. It did not signify that Miss Simpson told her they would have to keep out of the way, that they would see little of Mrs. Desborne, that while visitors were in the house it would be necessary for them to be still as mice. Aileen was quite content, more than content, indeed. To be under the same roof with Mrs. Desborne, to be able to oblige that lady even by effacing herself appeared to the foolish creature delightful experiences.

"It seems too good to be true," she said to Miss Simpson. In reply to which remark Miss Simpson smiled, though sadly.

"I will make it as pleasant for you as I can," she answered, not without a twinge of conscience, "but if I fail to render your stay agreeable, you must try to bear the disappointment. We shall not remain for any length of time."

But Aileen was not disappointed. Though she never sat down to table with Mrs. Desborne, or was asked to spend an evening in her company, or went out to drive or walk with her, she enjoyed her stay most thoroughly.

One day, without any intention of breaking through the quarantine imposed, she came face to face with Mrs. Surville, who inclined her head courteously and made some trifling remark, and remembered the meeting afterward.

"Who is that pretty girl you have here, Emily?" she asked Mrs. Desborne.

"Do you mean my maid?"

"No, oh, no! A girl with large eyes and rich brown hair and lovely complexion; not quite a lady perhaps, though she may be one."

"Oh! I know who you mean, she is a person my husband takes an interest in. She is here with Miss Simpson, who is trying to teach her English and not succeeding very well."

"She has a sweet face and soft, pleasant voice," said Mrs. Surville, puzzled.

Mrs. Desborne laughed a little bitterly as she replied, "And what will stand her in much better stead, a large fortune."

"No, really?"

"Really, she is quite a common person, but some relative left her a quantity of money. I call it a scandal—what can a girl in her rank do with money?"

"That is a question I cannot answer. I suppose, however, a woman in any rank can spend money. How much has she?"

"I really forget. Half a million or something of that sort."

"Half a million! Good heavens! And are you going to let that amount slip out of the family?"

"How do you mean?"

"Have you no impecunious relatives? Are there no gilded youths among us who are short of money and would marry Hecate herself if she came with a good dowry in her hand?"

"I am no matchmaker," said Mrs. Desborne, coldly, "and if I were, I should not consider Miss Fermoy a desirable connection."

"Fermoy is a good name. We will at once set about finding an ancestry for her and a husband."

"Pray do not be ridiculous," expostulated her cousin.

Mrs. Surville did not make herself ridiculous, but she followed Miss Simpson to her innermost fastnesses, and made acquaintance with the heiress, greatly to Aileen's surprise. She was continually inventing excuses to wander into the library where governess and pupil were often to be found. She would sit with them and chat for half an hour at a time. One fore-

noon, when Miss Simpson was busy, she went with Aileen into Regent's Park, and on another occasion made the girl accompany her when she wanted to go shopping.

"You are mad, Emily, not to cultivate Miss Fermoy, who simply believes you to be perfect," she said to her cousin.

"The more one keeps those sort of persons at a distance, the more they respect you," was the reply.

Mrs. Surville said nothing, but she thought that the farther off Mrs. Desborne kept every one the more highly she would be respected and esteemed.

"And I find I was mistaken," proceeded that lady ; "she has not half or even a quarter of a million."

"Still, I dare say she has enough to prove useful to a younger son. If I were not going to India I would take the matter in hand and arrange a marriage between her and Geoff Harlingford. You might manage that easily, Emily, but then you never did try to benefit your family."

Perhaps it was the contrast between her own fortuneless condition, because, as she always said, what is the interest on ten thousand pounds, that caused Mrs. Desborne to feel so bitterly her inability to buy a certain necklace on which she had set her affections.

"Mrs. Surville laughed over this disappointment, and talked to Miss Simpson about it in Aileen's presence.

"Emily has plenty of jewelry," she said ; "but she wants to be gorgeous when she goes to the Kilroys. You know I worried the Countess till I got her to send cards to Mr. and Mrs. Desborne. He, sensible man, won't go, so Emily will come with us, and I know her great desire is to outshine me ! She thought her dotting husband would give the necklace to her, but he says he can't afford the price, and she is consequently heartbroken. De Grancey is selling necklace, bracelet, and ear-rings, and a star for old Lady Lowden,

whose son is ruining her, and won't part with them except for ready money."

All this and much more Aileen heard, and said nothing; but on the very last day of their visit, while Miss Simpson was out, she put a cheque in her purse and drove down to De Grancey's. When she returned she had a parcel which she directed to Mrs. Desborne, and asked the maid to leave it on her mistress's dressing-table, together with a note.

Captain and Mrs. Surville had gone to other relatives by this time, and Mrs. Desborne consequently felt out of sorts when she went upstairs after luncheon to look at a dress her milliner had sent home—a dress so perfect it might have been styled a triumph of art, and which was destined to eclipse Mrs. Surville at the Kilroy ball immediately after Easter.

"Now if I had only that Lowden set," she thought; "but I shall have to wear the old ornaments that would spoil any gown."

It was very sad, and Mrs. Desborne sighed as she turned to her dressing-table.

"What is this parcel, Mortimer?" she asked her maid, laying aside the note, which looked ominously like a bill.

"It is one Miss Fermoy asked me to bring up, my lady," answered Mortimer ere she left the room.

Mrs. Desborne carelessly unfastened the parcel, imagining Miss Simpson had brought it in; but when she opened the cases and read Aileen's humble little note, her hard heart was touched for once.

"The poor, poor girl. How sweet of her!" she murmured, and straightway she repaired to the library, where Aileen was trembling lest her present should be returned.

She need not have been uneasy on that score.

"You dear child!" exclaimed Mrs. Desborne. "I have no words to thank you!" and straightway she thanked her with what Timothy Fermoy's daughter thought the sweetest song without words possible—a

kiss. "You have given me the very thing I most desired, but it is too much. You must not waste your money in this way."

"Oh! ma'am, what can I do? What can I even do to show my thankfulness to you. If my little present were ten times the worth it is, it would not tell you half of what I feel;" and Aileen, covering her face with her hands began to weep such happy tears as she had never shed in all her life before.

CHAPTER XXIV.

TOM CONNOLLAN'S LETTER.

Had Aileen been absent from Ashwater for ten years instead of ten days, Miss Wilton could not have evinced greater pleasure at seeing her once more.

"The place has seemed so lonely since you went away," she said, by a look including Miss Simpson in the "you," and Miss Simpson graciously replied for self and pupil that, although they had enjoyed their little visit immensely, yet she was glad to find herself again at Ashwater.

"This peaceful life," she added, "unfits one for the whirl of society," as though, dear, simple lady, she had been treading the round of dissipation, sitting up o' nights and gadding about all day!

"And how did the 'giddy whirl' affect you?" asked Miss Wilton, addressing Aileen.

"I was not whirling," was the answer.

"Out of it, eh?"

"Quite; still I had a very pleasant time."

"You got my note?"

"And answered it; did you not receive my reply?"

"Yes, oh yes! but you failed to write to Mr. Vernham."

"To Mr. Vernham? I had nothing to write about."

"I thought you might have done so. He seemed to want to see you."

"Probably he may come down next Sunday," observed Miss Simpson, with a little simper. She was thinking of one who would doubtless accompany Mr. Vernham—the most perfect gentleman, the most inter-

esting companion, the kindest friend ever bound in orthodox black, and published in human duodecimo as a lawyer.

He was down last Sunday, also," said Miss Wilton, referring to Mr. Vernham.

"What, again!" exclaimed Aileen.

"Yes, indeed," was the answer; "he must want to see you very much. The Dad met him loafing around—I beg your pardon—retracing his steps to Kingston via Hampton Wick, and asked him in to partake of our frugal fare. My excellent parent has taken quite a fancy to your friend."

"Did Mr. Thomas Desborne accompany him?" asked Miss Simpson, eagerly. "But no, he could not," she added, checking her youthful impetuosity, "for he knew we were in London."

"That was why I said I thought Aileen might have written to Mr. Vernham, in order to save him a useless journey," rejoined Miss Wilton.

"You had better send him a line now to tell him we are really back," remarked Miss Simpson.

"Yes, and I will post it," capped Miss Wilton.

"There is no necessity," said Aileen, flushing a little; "we shall probably hear from him."

"Well, you are a funny girl—one by yourself," observed Miss Wilton, as she rose to depart, and then she kissed her friend very tenderly, and went out into the fine March weather, to get a "cold or a color, perhaps both," leaving Aileen with a little feeling of chill creeping about her heart, which she had not felt before and did not understand.

"What could Mr. Vernham want?" she asked herself, "why did he wish to see her so particularly? why did he not write if he had anything special to say? He had always written before, what kept him from writing now? what had gone wrong?"

"I really think, my dear, you ought to send a note to Mr. Vernham or Thomas Desborne," urged Miss Simpson once more, but Aileen again said it was not neces-

sary and consequently Miss Simpson, nothing loth herself, indited a pretty little epistle to Mr. Thomas Desborne, mentioning that Mr. Vernham had twice come to Ashwater, and unfortunately found no one at home.

"Would it be well for me to write and invite him?" she asked, artlessly; "or will you ask him to accompany you on the occasion of your next visit, to which we are looking forward, as we always do, with pleasant anticipation?"

"To this effusion Mr. Thomas Desborne replied by return of post that perhaps it "would be better not to write to Mr. Vernham, but let matters take their course, I am very glad to hear what you say, and will go down to Teddington as soon as possible, and talk over this new departure with you."

"How like a man!" thought Miss Simpson. "He does not say when he is coming, still it will be 'soon as possible.' Very likely on Sunday."

Perhaps it was because Mr. Thomas Desborne was a man instead of a woman that he did not consider it necessary to tell Miss Simpson he meant to spend the Sunday, during the afternoon of which she so fondly hoped to enjoy his "intellectual conversation," with an old friend who lived at Dulwich. This was the case, however, and consequently it came about that when Sunday afternoon arrived and Mr. Vernham was ushered in alone, her disappointment proved very keen, and not even the wild thought which flashed through her sentimental mind, that Mr. Vernham was beginning to see something in Aileen he had not previously seen—something due entirely to the excellent influences which now surrounded that young person—could console her for the absence of a man who alone realized the ideal of perfection she had conceived.

"Are you afraid of coming out?" Philip asked Aileen, after they had been talking for some time about things which were to them indifferent.

"Not at all," she answered, without referring the question to Miss Simpson, who reflected, "She has still

much to learn," and watched them pass through the French windows and stroll away toward the river with that profound interest most women feel in following the movements of a pair of lovers, or even a pair who may become lovers.

"It would be an admirable arrangement," she decided, and yet she knew no more really about Philip than she did about the Emperor of Russia, or any other individual quite outside the pale of her acquaintance, but "'tis ever thus," or at least it is almost ever thus. The female heart is so fearfully and wonderfully sympathetic.

They sauntered down to the water. In the valley of the Thames everyone does the same thing; there is a charm in watching the currents, in following the course of the stream, unintelligible save to the initiated.

A long summer's day may be spent quite easily leaning over a bridge or lying idly under a tree looking at the river. No less troublesome way of killing time can be imagined. Whether it is very profitable is quite another question, and one in which, or in the former fact, neither the young man nor the young woman, pacing slowly beneath trees beginning shiveringly to put out tender buds, felt much interest.

"Are you certain you are sufficiently wrapped up?" asked Philip Vernham, as a cold blast swept across the lawn.

Aileen looked at her companion in some surprise. She had never walked with him before, save on that evening when they hurried to Bartholomew Square, talking as they went, and she never thought, she could not know, anything about that tender anxiety most men, more especially men who have loved and revered mother or sister or wife, feel lest the wind should blow too roughly on a woman's cheek.

Messrs. Desborne indeed were full of such solicitude, but that was a different matter. In the first place Aileen considered uncle and nephew exceptions to all

rules ; in the next, they were not young as Philip Vernham ; besides, she had not all her life long looked up to them as immeasurably superior to everything and everyone else, as she was trained to regard Mrs. Vernham's son.

Therefore, when he asked that question about her shawl in a tone such as she had never heard before, she could not help pausing an instant before answering.

"Quite sure, Mr. Philip, I rarely wrap myself up at all."

He looked at her with a smile which seemed given to something or someone far away, perhaps to the Aileen who had been and was not, who could never be again.

However that might be, it was the old Aileen, the Aileen he would always remember as she stood among piles of baskets on a Whit Monday not a year ago, with a pretty blush flushing her face, with the glancing sunbeams playing at hide and seek among her hair, with her large lovely eyes fixed on him while he searched for the advertisement which began "If Timothy Fermoy——," he seemed for a moment to see as they walked together down to the river.

"I wanted to speak to you alone," he said ; "that was why I asked you to come out, for I suppose, kind as Miss Simpson seems, you do not talk to her about Mrs. Fermoy."

"No. I talk to no person except you about Mrs. Fermoy. Are things going wrong at Battersea—I mean, are they worse than usual?"

"There is nothing exactly wrong, but matters seem a little unsettled, and I thought I would rather come down than write."

"It is very kind of you," said Aileen, gratefully.

"Perhaps I am selfish rather than kind," he answered with a strange embarrassment.

Perfectly honest people find even a whole truth, if it be half a deception, so difficult that they must needs

try to explain their utterance is not quite straightforward.

Such explanation, though it never makes the utterance straightforward, acts as a salve to their wounded conscience, and this was how Philip Vernham tried to heal his conscience.

Aileen could not understand him at all. He seemed so strange, and yet the thought struck her, might it not be she who was changed?

What had come between them? Why did he not talk? Why could she not answer as she was wont to do formerly? Why did she find it such an effort to say:

"You never could be selfish, Mr. Philip."

He made no immediate reply—indeed, made no reply at all, only walked on a few steps and then remarked:

"So far, I think Augustus Tripsdale has managed matters capitally for you, better even than his brother could have done."

"Indeed, I am sure of that," returned Aileen, in cordial assent. "I have often wished to show him how much obliged I am, but they are both proud, and it is hard to know how to offer anything without giving offence."

"You need not trouble yourself on that score," replied her companion. "The clever young fellow admires you so enthusiastically that the mere pleasure of serving you proves more than a sufficient reward."

Aileen did not know what to answer. She would have liked to say many things, but this new manner of Mr. Vernham's, his way of speaking to her as he might to his equal, disconcerted her immensely, and she held her peace.

"What a pretty place this is," said Philip, stopping for a moment and looking back at the house.

"Yes, lovely," agreed the girl; "in summer it must be like fairyland."

"Enchanted country though it be, I must not forget what I came—that is, what I wanted, to tell you," said Mr. Vernham. "Some time since Mrs. Fermoy, by an

unlucky accident, heard you had come into a great fortune——”

“How could she hear that? Did Mr. Tripsdale——”

“No,” interrupted the other, “the information did not come from either of the Tripsdales, but from a person called, if I remember rightly, Jackles.”

“But Mrs. Jackles is dead,” objected Aileen.

“You went to see her when she was ill, I believe, and said you had received a legacy——”

“Yes, I did. I remember——”

“You see how things come about. She told the woman who was nursing her, the woman told some gossips in the presence of her daughter, the daughter told Mr. Plashet in the presence of Mrs. Fermoy! All this Mr. Stenbridge heard from your old friend Jack, and Mrs. Stenbridge repeated the whole story to Augustus Tripsdale.”

“So that it was all my own fault.”

“If you like to say fault—yes. At any rate, Mrs. Fermoy got to know of your good fortune and worried young Tripsdale greatly in consequence. She wrote in a threatening way to him; she went to his employer’s place of business to search out his real abode. The employer declared he would give her in charge, and sent for a policeman, and altogether there was much unpleasantness before she could be persuaded to go home. Then Augustus Tripsdale wrote her a very stiff letter, dated from his friends’ house near Chertsey, saying if she persisted in giving so much trouble her allowance should be discontinued. Indeed, I imagine he did keep it back for a few days. At all events she at last was induced to keep quiet, but when she retired from the battle her sons began to show fight. They almost besieged Mr. Grafton’s offices. Mr. Grafton is the wood engraver for whom Augustus Tripsdale works. They went there when tipsy and created a disturbance; they sat on the stairs, and, in fact, did everything possible to provoke a quarrel, but the matter was again arranged and another letter was

written to them, begging that they would put their request, whatever it might be, into writing.

"Here it is ; I thought you had better see for yourself how the matter stood."

Aileen took the sheet of ruled paper, which bore stamped on it plainly the sign and seal of a beer-stained pint pot.

It was from Tom Connollan as head of that clan, and set forth that having met a nice, steady young woman who was willing to marry him, he made so bold as to ask Aileen, who, he was given to understand, was not within a pound or two, not to say fifty, if she would help him to make a home for his two motherless children as well as his brothers, with the exception of Jack, who was provided for.

He wanted what, though Aileen, no doubt, would never miss, she might depend on making a man of him, one hundred pounds, to open a tripe shop in the old shed.

"There's a lot of money to be made out of tripe," he went on, "and I'm the man as could make it. If you'll do this I'll keep Peter and Dick hard at work, and try to prevent the old woman bothering you. Mr. Parkyns has gone, paid his shot, and given up his rooms, so we'll all stop together and live as comfortably as we can. Hoping you'll see your way to send me what I need to start on and make a big fortune out of and to save any more trouble, I remain your loving brother till death do us part,

"THOMAS CONNOLLAN."

With a shrinking disgust Aileen read this plainly expressed, ill-spelt, badly written epistle through. The dirty beer-stained paper, smelling horribly of bad tobacco, seemed to bring the whole of her past once more before the girl's eyes, and show as if in some cruelly realistic panorama the scenes she had witnessed, the misery she had endured.

Was she never to be rid of these people? was her

poor father's mistake to be visited through long years upon his child? was she ceaselessly to be afflicted by a woman who was no blood relation? by men who were no kin of hers, who would always be disreputable, a shame to be connected with, whatever their rank; who were utterly destitute of that true self-respect and honest pride the possession of which often makes a laborer a gentleman, and the lack of which transforms a peer into a clod.

"He is not my brother," she indignantly exclaimed, and would have torn the letter across, had not Mr. Vernham laid his hand on hers.

"Do not do that," he said, gently. "May I read it?"

"Yes," Aileen answered, the flush of anger fading from her cheek as she gave Mr. Vernham Thomas Connollan's letter.

Then as he read, leaning against that old ash-tree, the branches of which dipped into the water, she looked wearily at the scene before her.

Ceaselessly the river flowed by, whimsically the little currents and eddies swirled in to the bank and broke against it with tiny frets and plashes that made a strange music of their own.

It was like life! deep sorrow flowing steadily, silently through some sorely tried human heart, while the small worries of daily existence, the petty cares of consequence one hour and forgotten the next, kept up a ceaseless lament, uttered by those who had no real griefs.

Insignificant troubles make a noise in the world, but great affliction holds on its course with quiet insistence, broadening a man's nature as rivers in a desert fertilize the land, rendering what otherwise had been but arid sand, a fruitful plain.

"What shall you do?" asked Philip, folding up Mr. Connollan's epistle.

"Send the money," replied the girl. "I would do a deal more than that if it were likely to be of real use."

"I am so sorry for you, Aileen," said the young man.

"Yes, I sometimes feel the whole thing is a little hard," she answered ; "but perhaps after all it is I who was wrong."

"In what way?"

"In thinking I could ever leave them behind ; in fancying I might fit myself for another sort of life from that I was born in."

"What would your father and mother say, Aileen, if they could speak to you now?"

"I don't know, Mr. Philip. Perhaps that it would have been best to rest content in that state of life in which God placed me. I often think I might have been happier if I had stayed as I was, but I can't go back now."

"I hoped you were happy."

"I am and I am not," she answered, "but then I talk foolishly—who is happy? don't mind me, please. It vexes me that you should hear me say such things. I ought to have more sense."

They spoke but little as they went back to the house, where Miss Simpson was conversing in her best manner to Major Wilton and his daughter.

"I am going to Richmond," explained the former, "and Carrie said she would walk with me as far as Ashwater, on the chance that you would take her in for half an hour."

"Delighted, of course," said Miss Simpson, thinking, however, it was possible to have too much of a good thing, and that whether good or bad, the Wiltons on Sunday, when Mr. Thomas Desborne might come in any moment, were quite too much.

"Where is Aileen?" asked the young lady.

"She has gone with Mr. Vernham for a turn round the lawn," answered Miss Simpson. "It was too chilly for me to venture out," she added, as a meek apology to outraged propriety.

Major Wilton agreed that it was cold for the time of year, deuced cold, in fact. Miss Wilton laughed.

"I see them," she cried. "I'll go and—but no, I mustn't spoil sport."

"My dear—!" exclaimed Miss Simpson, horrified; the major looked as if he did not understand.

Miss Wilton stayed half an hour; she stayed an hour; she stayed for tea; she stayed after tea till twilight, till the lamps were lighted. Mr. Thomas Desborne—long wished for—had not come; Major Wilton did not return. The evening promised to pass heavily. At last Miss Wilton said she really could wait for her Dad no longer; she must go.

"But you will stay for supper, surely," expostulated Miss Simpson, earnestly hoping she would do nothing of the kind.

"Couldn't possibly, thanks awfully," said the young lady, putting on her hat, in which she looked bewitching, and a fur cape that added a lovely touch of softness to her beauty. "Good-evening, Miss Simpson. Good-by, you dear old darling," she said, embracing Aileen with effusion. "Good-evening, Mr. Vernham. No, no, I won't hear of it," she went on determinedly, as Philip murmured something about being allowed the pleasure of seeing her home.

"If you will not permit me to walk with you, I must walk after you," said the one cavalier, a little awkwardly. "I could not think of letting you go alone."

"Mr. Vernham is quite right," supplemented Miss Simpson. "It is not fit for you to walk by yourself along these roads. If you must go, pray allow him to be your escort."

"I assure you it is all on my way," added Philip. "I am going to Kingston."

"But you, at least, will return to supper," said Miss Simpson.

"Thank you, no. I must return to town; so if Miss Wilton will allow me to have the honor of accompanying her as far as Homewood, I shall be in good time for my train."

"It is not fair," pouted Miss Wilton, "three against

one, but what must be, must be. I am myself vanquished, though it will always lay heavy on my conscience that I have broken up this merry party."

There was a good deal of laughing and talking while they all went into the hall, when Philip put on his coat and hat and took his stick.

"To defend me!" suggested Miss Wilton, playfully.

"If need be," he answered.

"Good-night again, then; I feel as if I had done something desperately wicked, but you'll forgive me, won't you?" said Miss Wilton, addressing Miss Simpson and Aileen.

At that moment, the latter suddenly saw Philip Vernham looking at her friend with an expression which stabbed her as if with a sword-thrust. Then he and Miss Wilton went out into the moonlight; as they walked Miss Wilton turned and kissed her hand; Philip raised his hat.

"Shut the door, my dear," said Miss Simpson, shivering, "the wind blows very keen."

CHAPTER XXV.

AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE.

Never since Mr. Desborne entered into possession, had Ashwater been so gay as during the golden summer that followed after Aileen's accession to fortune.

There were garden parties, musical parties, boating parties, house parties, picnic parties, at homes, private theatricals—from all which delights the neighborhood was unkindly excluded, and as a return criticised freely.

In truth, perhaps, the company taken from the fringe of fashionable life, in society to a certain extent, out of it to speak with strict accuracy, was such as to excite the ire as well as the envy of those who could, to use their own expression, have bought and sold every man and woman of the connection ; and yet who, spite of their guineas, their respectability, and in many cases their talents, were left hopelessly behind in the race after the Upper Ten.

It was all very well to call them camp followers, but they were admitted, spite of known impecuniosity, to houses hardly earned wealth and honestly acquired riches sighed in vain to enter.

Everyone was remarkable, not because of his own merits, but because of the standing of someone else ; of himself he might be nothing, but he always turned out to be related to another person who was something.

Thus it came to pass that when anyone spoke about Mr. Smyth, he added grandson to Sir Clarence Smyth, of Waterloo Farm, or Jones, cousin to Baron Jones ;

Lucknow Jones, you know; or Robinson, great-nephew of Earl Crusoe. These and many other grandsons and granddaughters, cousins, nephews, brothers, sisters of remarkable individuals, were poor, as the lineal descendants and near relatives of great people often are, but Solomon, when appalled in all his glory, was not better dressed; they spoke well, they looked well, they had the indescribable tone of those who had always mixed well; they were utterly satisfied with themselves, and possessed in perfection the art of rendering others dissatisfied with their own less attractive persons and belongings; when they condescended to walk or drive in the valley of the Thames they did so as if they were an invading and conquering army, they behaved as if they had bought the fee-simple of the river, and as though Providence had created the "enamelled meadows" of Strawberry Hill, the wooded slopes of Richmond, and the stretches of Bushey Park, merely that these things might furnish them with an opportunity for a few hours' pleasure.

There, for example, was Major Wilton. He had no claim personally to be considered an exalted individual, but his father had been a nephew of the Marquis of Madeira, one of a noted set who held high festival with George the Fourth, and left behind him a noble legacy of debts for any descendant to pay that chose.

Major Wilton was a loyal chip of the good old block, always in difficulties, always in more or less bad odor, always going through life with feelers out, trying where and how he could draw a little money from his fellows in a gentlemanly way.

He was free of Ashwater; he at whose house play ran high, who was to be seen on every race-course, who owed money to every tradesman round and about, who paid as little as he could help, and got as much as he could! People said, and they were right in saying, that Mr. Desborne acted wrongly in making such a man and men such as he free of Ashwater.

But they did not know, how could they, that Mr. Desborne had as little control over his house as the greatest stranger who sat in judgment on him; that it was not with his will, that it was indeed scarcely with his knowledge, the mad herd of fashion rioted through his grounds. His wife wished it, that was enough; she was happy, he rested content. He had made one honest effort to put affairs on a different footing unavailingly. All he could do, therefore, was to try and meet his expenses by self-denial, by closer attention to business, by endeavoring to increase his income, by availing himself of opportunities the Desbornes had hitherto deemed unfitting their attention.

How he contrived to stave off those liabilities which came upon him suddenly in the previous October, with the peremptory insistence of an armed man, he alone knew.

In times of peril it needs a steady brain and a well-balanced mind to refrain from throwing cherished possessions to the wolves, if a few minutes of grace can be purchased by sacrificing them; and it was for this reason that although he ought to have known his action could only defer the evil hour and not avert it, that Mr. Desborne went on promising, postponing, raising money by sale and mortgages, striving by hook or by crook to carry forward the evil day of settlement to a period when he hoped he should be better prepared to meet it.

When a man takes Hope for his banker, he must be in very bad case. The Head of the Firm had done this, and was consequently in very bad case indeed.

Could he but have coined into gold all the fancies with which that deceitful financier tickled his ear, Croesus himself had not been so rich; but the rainbow's hues, though splendid, are poor things to keep houses upon in a matter-of-fact age when railway companies refuse to issue season tickets on credit.

Business was very good indeed, that was the one bit of real blue in the sky. For years the clerks in Cloak

Lane had not seen so many clients or been so hard worked. To the prospectuses of various new companies, Messrs. Desborne & Son's good name was appended, for when once it was seen in the newspapers that the firm was willing to act in this sort of business, there came quite a rush of promoters to the quiet offices that had never opened their doors to such visitors in, as one of those visitors said, "the old days before the flood."

Mr. Thomas Desborne did not like it, and advised caution ; but the worst of caution nowadays is that while a man deliberates his chances vanish, and there was much commercial truth in Mr. Knevitt's remark to Mr. Puckle :

"It does not matter much what the companies are, so long as our costs are all right."

This was not Mr. Thomas Desborne's view of the position, but he had so often remonstrated with his nephew for allowing business to slip away, that when he began to state his side of the case he found his own arguments used to defeat him.

Nevertheless, he had influence sufficient to get many a "shady" venture refused, many a plausible rogue sent to find lawyers more complaisant. Desbornes, still strong in its own integrity, held up its head as of old, and turned an unabashed face to the world, though its junior partner didn't like much of the new business, and wished most heartily "Ned had buckled to work before so many of their best friends took their affairs elsewhere."

No matter how fervent his wishes might be, however, his nephew's were more earnest still.

If only he had not let the days go by unimproved ; if only he had stuck to law and left pleasure and philanthropy to others possessed of more money and more leisure ; if he had given his subscriptions after deliberation, and his time not at all, how differently he might then have been situated. In the watches of the nights he considered his uncle's many words of wisdom, and

lamented that he had not laid them to heart. In the noontide he could have prayed with Ahaz, though not for the same reason, that the shadow might turn backward ten degrees on the dial of his life. Ten degrees! Oh, if only the past ten years could be restored to him, how he would labor, how wise he would become! If he never before fully understood the folly of the five virgins, he comprehended then. Once the day of existence stretched before him long and happy. Hour after hour was vouchsafed to him for labor; hour after hour he wasted, he frittered away in pursuits that left no result, which, even when spent in striving to benefit his fellows, were comparatively barren of result.

Sometimes, as he walked along the busy streets, hope deserting him for a moment, would leave an empty void in his heart for some terrible truth to take possession of.

Once, just opposite the Baltic Coffee House, a verse in this way struck him a blow under which he almost reeled.

“Work while it is yet day, for the night cometh when no man can work.” Was his day well-nigh spent, was his night at hand? For a moment the sun seemed to give no light; he did not see the pavement or the passers-by, or hear the noise of traffic; then hope, like one who had but crossed the street, returned, and nestled in his breast once more, and said sweet comforting words, and restored his fainting courage. Yes, while it was still day, he must work; ample time remained. Matters were never so bad that it was impossible to mend them. Business was capital; plenty of money must soon be coming in, with more to follow. When the summer was over he would speak seriously to his wife, take her fully into his confidence, and between them they would strike out some plan of retrenchment.

Meantime he could not spoil the pleasant time she was having at Ashwater, and parties in the country cost comparatively little.

"If only we can manage without speaking to her at all," whispered hope, "and we may."

Who does not know how the tale went on and continued like a serial from week to week and from month to month? Who that has in his own person paid the penalty for such folly, or paid the penalty of their folly for others, but could follow every thought as it wound a devious way through Mr. Desborne's mind.

After a time even those who knew nothing from experience of such misleading will-o'-the-wisps, began to notice that Mr. Desborne was not looking like himself.

"Are you ill?" several acquaintances asked him.

"No," he answered, cheerily, "perfectly well; I am only a bit overworked."

"Making haste to be rich?"

"That's about it."

"Well, you'd best be careful, money may be bought at too high a price," and the speaker, while he uttered these words of wisdom, would shake his head in solemn warning.

As if Mr. Desborne did not know all about that practically; as if he had not begun the race for life in which eventually everything a man values is flung to the winds; as if he were not buying money at a price which sooner or later must bring ruin!

Mr. Thomas Desborne was not, any more than the city world, blind to his nephew's changed appearance. Long before outsiders began to remark the pallid cheek, the dull eye, the many little hieroglyphics care as well as sickness graves on human faces, he had noted "how bad Ned looked," how nervous he was getting, how restless yet languid he seemed, how thin his hands were.

More than once he said, half laughingly, "You are doing too much; you know you are not accustomed to devote yourself to business in this frantic manner. There is no need to kill a willing horse;" but the Head of the Firm answered so certainly that he was

well, that work suited him, that the warm weather alone caused those appearances of illness which alarmed his uncle, who looked after him as a hen fussed over one chicken, it proved difficult to pursue the subject.

At last, however, Mr. Thomas Desborne entreated him to take a holiday. "Run up to Scotland," he said; "you have not had a thorough change for a long time."

"I will when August comes," was the reply; "though really there is nothing the matter with me."

"You have been trying to do too much. I advise you to spare yourself a little. There is surely no necessity for you to slave as you have been doing for many months past."

"On the contrary, there is every necessity," returned his nephew, in one of those bursts of confidence which seem occasionally quite independent of our wills. "I want money—I want to increase my income."

Mr. Thomas Desborne looked very grave, but not stern. He could not look stern in view of the changed face of one he loved better than all the world.

"I am sorry to hear you want money, Ned," he replied. "If you are really so short, I could spare you a hundred pounds, or even two."

His nephew felt inclined to laugh hysterically. A hundred, or even two! What were hundreds in his ocean of debts! Good Heavens! if he had never before realized the length and breadth of the gulf which separated his uncle's ideas from his own, never fully estimated the madness it would be to confess the state of his affairs, he did so then.

"Do you think I want to rob you?" he answered, putting a strong restraint upon himself and speaking with a cheerfulness which deceived his relative. "Have I not taken enough, more than enough, from the kindest man on earth? No, I am not in need of two hundred or even one hundred pounds, but I am anxious to do what you have always advised me to do, make Des-

bornes return a larger income. Living is expensive nowadays, and it is wise to look to the future."

"It is, but not to lay yourself on a bed of sickness. Would it not be advisable to retrench a little?"

"It is so difficult to retrench."

"But it may be necessary. I don't like preaching, Ned, but do you think it is well to have so much company at Ashwater?"

Ned flushed. His uncle's words made him flinch as though they touched a raw wound.

"It is the first time Captain and Mrs. Surville have been there, and my wife is anxious to make the visit pleasant. They will be going to India shortly, in fact they intended to have left England in the spring, but he got an extension of leave."

"Yes?" said Mr. Thomas Desborne.

"And of course, when they go there will be an end of the company you object to."

"Nay, why should I object if you can afford it?"

"I could not go on affording it, but, as I have said, it will be only for a short time."

"That is a good hearing, because no man should live up to the extreme verge of his income, more especially a man whose income depends largely on his health. I am not so young as I was, and though I hope and believe I am good for many a year to come, still I might not be able to keep things going if you were laid up for an indefinite period. I do not think, Ned, you ought to be short of money," he added in a softer tone, "or rather, anxious about it. You have been, and I am glad to be able to let you have, almost the whole of my share in the profits of this business; then, during the last ten months, Miss Fermoy has paid you for the advantages she enjoys at the rate of six hundred per annum. I do not of course say that is all cash in pocket, but much of it must be. Mrs. Desborne's settlement brings in four hundred and fifty pounds each year; you have your father's property; you have only a low ground rent to pay for your

Regent's Park House and Ashwater, so really your income, taken as a whole, is handsome. Of course Miss Fermoy's six hundred may cease at any time, but still, while it lasts it ought to be a help and——"

"Do not say anything more, uncle, please," interrupted Mr. Desborne, who felt this catalogue almost more than he could bear. "Ere long, I intend to put my incomings and outgoings on a different and more satisfactory footing, but for this summer I wish to leave matters as they are."

"I am very glad to hear you mean to set your affairs in order, and I won't say another word on the subject. But, Ned, get away if only for a fortnight. Do not consider expense, your account may be low, so I will write you a cheque at once, and only ask in return one favor—that you come back stronger."

The words and the manner might have touched a heart of stone, and as Mr. Desborne's was not stone, but very human flesh and blood, he could not answer for a moment, but sat struggling with a torrent of remorse that proved almost overpowering. He stretched out a hand and held his uncle's till he could speak.

"No, uncle, I will take no more from you," he said at last. "I do not want such a sum, really. If I did, I would tell you, and I cannot go away just yet, there is so much to attend to; but when August comes I will get away. Scotland is the very place, you are right, you are always right."

And always had been right, that was the worst of it!

The whole way to Waterloo Station, where he walked via Queen Victoria Street and the Embankment in company with a racking headache which he vainly sought thus to exorcise, Mr. Desborne preached a sermon to himself that had for text twelve words, "I do not think, Ned, you ought to be short of money." No, he ought not, never man was more helped, never man had finer chances, never man could have made a better thing of life; once he had the world at his foot, and now what was he?—a poor wretch weighed down by a very mill-

stone of debt, afraid to open his letters, afraid of every question his uncle asked, afraid of what a day might bring forth, only sustained from hour to hour by a fallacious hope that the chapter of accidents might somehow end well for him ; that fortune, who had so often stood his friend, would again be gracious and bring help from some unexpected source which might enable him to stand erect once more.

How often to one battling honestly against sore odds such help does come, the annals of struggling poverty could tell. At the darkest hour light has dawned ; from the most unlikely quarter a hand has been stretched forth as if from heaven to succor and save.

But though this is true, the converse is true likewise. Fortune does not go on showering her favors for ever, and when a man's luck turns against him, how swiftly to ruin he goes. There is no use in trying to make head against that flood. As the "stars in their courses seemed to fight against Sisera," so everything in this world, the most casual circumstance, the most ordinary event, brings trouble in its train. Luck was going against him, that was the conclusion of the weary reverie. A wave of conviction brought that truth so forcibly home, Mr. Desborne paused under one of the plane-trees, with a half intention of returning to Cloak Lane and taking his uncle into confidence.

"It will be hard for him to bear," he thought, "but not so hard as the bankruptcy !"

Slowly he walked across the pavement, and resting his arms on the stone parapet, looked at the sparkling water. If his uncle had stood beside him then he would have told him, but deliberation is death to impulse.

As he watched the river gliding away, all he would have to tell recurred to him, all his criminal want of thought, all his blind folly, all his dishonest shiftlessness, all his marital weakness, all his desperate attempts to retrieve his position, and, worst of all, his actual situation. He could not confess. He could not say,

"I am afraid to look into the amount of my debts," "I do not know how I am to retrench," "I have not moral courage sufficient to meet my creditors," "I am too fond of my wife to find fault with her expenditure." Things would have to drift on as they were. An enormous influx of business might float his barque off the sands—it was not beyond the bounds of possibility that Desborne & Son would yet figure as a limited liability company. So far as he knew, no firm of solicitors had yet attempted to do anything of the sort, but all things must have a beginning. Why should Desbornes not set the fashion? Why not, indeed? The idea was as feasible as any of the other ideas with which he strove to cheat himself and quiet his conscience.

"A lump sum of money," that was the enchanting phrase Hope rang like joy bells in his ears. "A lump sum of money for a good old business, for an honest name, for an unblemished character. His uncle would not like it, but he might be talked over, and, besides, was not he, Edward Desborne, the Head of the Firm, in addition to which his uncle could not always——"

At this point Edward Desborne resumed his walk toward Waterloo. If he had instead turned his face eastward that evening and steadily pursued his way cityward, Desbornes would have been saved and the festivities at Ashwater cut short.

As matters were, when he arrived there the silence of a house whence nearly all life had fled, struck him with a cold sense of solitude.

No one was playing lawn tennis, no young man in flannels, no girl in boating costume was to be seen coming up the walk from the river, the piano was closed, the drawing-room deserted, the blinds down, there was a general effect as though some one lay dead in an upper chamber. Mr. Desborne flung himself wearily into an armchair, and was marvelling where everybody had gone, what this new departure meant, when he heard a step on the gravel, one of the blinds was pushed aside, and Aileen entered through the

open French window, carrying a garden hat full of flowers in her hand.

"Oh! I did not know that you had returned, Mr. Desborne," she said, apologetically. "I hope you have not been back long."

"Only long enough to wonder whether Ashwater were an enchanted palace, and all its inhabitants under a spell," he answered, with a smile.

"They are all gone to a garden party at Stoke D'Abernon," she exclaimed.

"Except you?"

"I am nobody, and I never go anywhere."

"Should you not have liked to be present at this affair?"

"Mrs. Desborne kindly wished me to accompany her, but I am really happier at home."

"You are a strange girl."

"In what way?"

"I can scarcely explain. Where is Miss Simpson?"

"At Cobham."

"So you alone have not followed the multitude to do evil?"

"I have not followed the multitude, at all events."

"And when will anyone be back?"

"That is doubtful. Stoke D'Abernon is a long way off, and there was some talk about not driving back till the cool of the evening."

"At what hour are we to dine, then?"

"Mrs. Desborne thought it would be pleasanter and more convenient to have an early supper."

"A very good idea in such weather; meanwhile may one ask for some tea?"

"You shall have it at once," and Aileen left the room to give orders, for though not actually residing with Mrs. Desborne, she had during all that summer been a frequent visitor at Ashwater, where she was now regarded as a person worthy of consideration, as one who could give and had given jewels worth twelve

hundred pounds, and who would be a desirable bride for one of the impecunious Harlingfords.

Mrs. Surville was so keen about putting a good thing in the way of her family that she would have had the girl constantly at Teddington, but Aileen was not always anxious to be there—indeed, of her own free will she would never have entered the place while high revel was in progress.

Ashwater in the dull season had once been pleasant to her, but she knew now she would always feel the giddy throng that gathered there, when leaves were green and roses bloomed, and the Thames was alive with outrigger and punt and canoe, utterly uncongenial.

It was not likely one so born, whose experiences had been so hard, whose ideals were so high, who cherished such unworldly and almost impossible notions of what men and women might be, should have more in common with Mrs. Desborne's guests than they with her.

"I will go to Ashwater if you wish me," she said to Miss Simpson, "but I would rather not."

And this was quite true. "Who am I that I should be here?" she thought.

The life held no charm for her, the spectacle had no attraction. After seeing fashionable folk amusing themselves once, it seemed to this girl that she had seen them always.

Their ways were different, of course, from Mrs. Fermoy's, but there was a likeness nevertheless. With all her heart Aileen rejoiced to get away from them. With all her soul she longed to be in some quiet place where the sound of their incessant chattering and light laughter would fail to reach her ears. In the old days holiday making had appeared bad enough, but to Aileen's eyes, shadowed by the memory of former troubles, dim with the weight of unshed tears, the frivolous irresponsibility of that giddy throng appeared worse still.

"They are just like a parcel of foolish children," she murmured to herself.

The unhappy never can form quite fair judgments. Had Aileen been happy she might have looked with more toleration at the gay guests who, though no doubt burdened with cares and sorrows of their own, did all they could to make that summer a golden one.

Looking at them, at people who resembled the lilies of the field inasmuch that, though arrayed like Solomon in all his glory, they toiled not, neither did they spin, spending life's little day in flitting from amusement to amusement, and sipping the honey of pleasure from every enjoyment that presented itself, the girl could but wonder if this were a sort of existence to be desired.

It did not seem to her great, or good, or beautiful, but then, as has been said, she was unhappy. She was fighting her fight, she was passing through the greatest sorrow a woman can well be called on to endure, the sorrow that comes of the knowledge that she has loved unsought, and loved unloved.

The discovery had pierced her heart like a sword, it had cut through every fibre of self-respect, every vein and nerve of dignity which, from the lady in the hall to the village maiden, is a woman's just and best possession. Like many an one before her, she had unwittingly thought love was only the truest gratitude, and not till she saw Philip Vernham, all unconscious, look with the inexpressible tenderness of a first affection on Caroline Wilton's lovely face, did she awaken from her dream and understand the story that had lain hidden in her breast.

All that night she lay awake wrestling with her troubles, seeking peace and finding none; for days she sought solitude at every possible moment, and pacing up and down the river walk, fought a long fight from which, at last, she came forth scarred, but victorious.

"Who was she to have dared, even unconsciously, to lift her eyes to him. No one in the world was good enough for Philip Vernham, but oh! how she wished he had fixed his choice elsewhere."

Often, when she thought formerly of the lady he would marry, she pictured some one young, beautiful, accomplished, gracious, but not in the least resembling Miss Wilton.

She could not fancy that modern girl, kind though she was, his wife. She had always thought he would flee from such an one as from a pestilence. She had felt ashamed that he should hear her talk, notice her self-possessed manners—so assured, to say the least ; so fast, to say the worst. She was fond of Caroline Wilton, grateful to her ; she admired the beautiful face, the slender, willow-like figure, the lovely hands, the sweet voice, the subtle air of high breeding, which all her slang failed to neutralize ; but she was not poor Aileen's ideal—she was far from being the perfect creature to whom, though her own heart was rent, she would thankfully have given to the man she thought better than all the world.

This was the simple story that had deepened Aileen's life river, taught her more than Miss Simpson ever dreamed of, and produced a change many persons felt, though they could not define.

If the malady be taken rightly, even an unreturned love, a love which can never be returned, exercises a beneficent effect on men and women, and as Aileen was not one to take a disease wrongly, Mr. Desborne thought he had never seen a sweeter, quieter girl than she who sat opposite to him in the cool, shaded drawing-room, pouring out that tea for which he longed.

"If you remember," he said, "I asked you in the spring whether you did not think it might be well to invest a portion of your yearly income in something likely to bring in a profit rather than keep so much money lying idle at your bankers."

"Yes, I recollect," she answered ; "and I am afraid you thought me a little foolish because I said I liked to have the money in the bank ready to give away or waste without telling anybody what I wanted to do with it."

"Indeed, no ; I was in the most perfect sympathy with you on that point, only you know I felt bound to point out a few thousands were buried in a napkin."

"Hardly that," she said, with a smile. "Some of them have done good, or at all events given pleasure, and some more of them may perhaps do good or give pleasure in the future. Money is a very new thing to me ; no doubt I do not know much about the best way to use riches, but I hope I shall learn. It seems to me, however, there is no happiness in making a present if one is obliged to tell anybody one has made it."

"Many persons are never happy in making a present unless they can tell everybody about it," said Mr. Desborne, with a bitterness foreign to his nature.

Aileen imagined she had vexed him, and sat rebuked.

"Why I recur to the matter is for this reason," he went on, after a moment's silence : "A man in whose judgment I have confidence tells me a very pretty little property in Hampshire is to be sold at a very low figure, and I thought you might like to become a land-owner on a small scale. Here are the particulars," and he handed Aileen a paper which set forth that Rackington Hall was to be sold for a sum which really seemed absurd.

"The house, though old and small," said Mr. Desborne, "has capabilities. There are lawns and shrubberies, flower and kitchen gardens, a fine orchard, farmery, and three hundred acres of land ; so far as I can judge, the place is really a great bargain, and if you have such a thing as earth hunger, this seems a good opportunity to satisfy it."

"What should I do with the land ?" asked Aileen.

"You could let it off. Do think the matter over. Rackington Hall would prove, I fancy, a good investment."

The girl shook her head. "I do not like to say no to anything you advise, Mr. Desborne," she answered, "but I have no wish for an estate or to use the money

you are thinking about in that way. On the whole, I would rather buy a house in town; but, indeed, I should prefer to do neither."

"Very well," returned Mr. Desborne, "we will let the matter drop. I suppose our pleasure-makers have returned," he added, as the hall door-bell pealed imperatively. "By the by, I conclude Miss Simpson was of the party?"

"Yes," she wished to see Stoke D'Abernon, and—"

"Major Wilton," announced a servant, and the Major entered.

"I must beg your pardon for intruding," he began, "but as we were passing I thought I would leave this book Mrs. Desborne wished to look at. Allow me to introduce my friend, Mr. Parkyn. Ah, Miss Fermoy, how-do? In this dim religious light I did not recognize you. Mr. Parkyn, Miss——"

"I have already the pleasure of knowing Miss Fermoy," interrupted Major Wilton's friend, who though utterly astonished at the meeting, proved equal to the occasion. What a long time it is since we met," and he held out his hand, which Aileen took, scarcely knowing what she did.

"I hope you have been quite well," he went on.

"Yes, thank you," she faltered.

"I did not expect to have the happiness of meeting you here. Charming neighborhood, isn't it?" and so he took possession of the girl, while Major Wilton talked to Mr. Desborne. "Capital fellow, Parkyn," he said, sotto voce. "Ran up against him accidentally in town this morning."

"Now, you've never yet paid us that promised visit," I said.

"I will some day," he replied.

"No time like the present," I declared, quite just in that way pinning him down. "Meet me at Waterloo 6.30 sharp, and we'll run down to my little crib, put you up for the night, and go over to Sandown together to-morrow."

“ ‘Right you are,’ he said, clapping me on the back, so here he is.”

If Major Wilton expected to be asked to dinner he was disappointed. There were times when that gallant officer palled on Mr. Desborne, and consequently, when he had exhausted hope he was fain to retire from Ash-water, taking his guest with him.

That evening, before she went upstairs, Aileen took an opportunity of changing her mind.

“I have been thinking over what you said about the Hampshire place, and believe it might be well to buy it. We could pay the money out of those shares.”

“Ah! then I must speak to my uncle about that, and hear if he approves of dipping further into your principal.”

CHAPTER XXVI.

"MAJOR WILTON'S ADVICE."

There is a very absurd error into which many persons have a way of falling—namely, fancying because a man consorts with rich people he must himself be rich. They seem to imagine wealth is catching like smallpox, and that consequently no one can be long in its company without contracting the same generous complaint.

Major Wilton had allowed himself to be deceived by this delusion.

Believing as he did that the Desbornes, uncle and nephew, were "wallowing in gold—wallowing," he jumped to the conclusion Mr. Vernham must be on the high road to "wallow" likewise.

It is necessary in some states of life to take a great deal for granted, and the Major took a great deal indeed. He imagined that not merely did this new friend possess a small fortune, but felt satisfied he was in the right way to make a prodigious one. Further, seeing Aileen Fermoy had succeeded to her uncle's money, he saw no just cause or impediment why Philip should not succeed to his uncle's money.

He did not actually know whether the young man owned an uncle, but that was a mere detail. If he had not an uncle he must have some other rich relatives.

"There is such solidity about city folks," he was wont to remark, and young Vernham's reticence concerning his position only tended to strengthen the good Major's belief that it was unassailable.

He made inquiries concerning Brickers as he might

about a gold mine, and finding they were "A1, Sir," built up a very pretty little romance on the strength of his information.

No man could have welcomed another to his "humble abode" with warmer hospitality than he did this "rising young man," and the young man, quite unaware of what was in the Major's mind, felt grateful for kindness which he deemed absolutely disinterested.

The fact that Philip knew nothing of cards, and declined to venture a bet on this and that favorite, only confirmed his belief in the great future looming before this prudent young citizen.

"That is how they make their pile," declared Major Wilton, alluding to the ways of East End worthies. "Ah, if my poor father had only bound me apprentice to some honest trade I might have been dealing in my millions, instead of cursing an ungrateful country for its niggardliness," which is a pretty way many gallant gentlemen in the receipt of half-pay have of extolling themselves while depreciating others.

Having seen with half an eye that Mr. Philip Vernham was "gone" on his daughter, he, with the prompt action of an old soldier who "ought to have been general, begad," made this desirable suitor at once free of his home and hearth in that cordial way in which such people, when attracted by self-interest, do kind things.

At the same time Miss Wilton welcomed her admirer also for many reasons, not the least among which chanced to be that she enjoyed the sport.

She liked him, she knew he "was over head and ears in love" with her. He was a novelty, so simple, so honest, so unlike other men who had come wooing; she believed he either was or would be rich—she wanted a home, she wished to be away from her father, all these influences were at work, but an influence stronger than any was that influence of sport which makes a cat spring on a mouse, and a dog watch for a rat, and a man stalk a deer.

She felt satisfied foolish Aileen loved this grave if not potent signor, and though undoubtedly she was very fond of Aileen, and had good reasons for being grateful to that fortunate young person, she never even thought of not leading Mr. Vernham into temptation—rather she used every art of which she was mistress to lure him on.

And Philip let himself be lured. Though there were times when he fought hard against his fate and remained absent and vowed he would keep away from the “Lorelei” and refuse to listen to her song, he came back again to bask in her beauty and depart more under the spell of her enchantment than ever.

When this had been going on for some months the Major thought it would be prudent to bring matters to a point, and accordingly, on the Saturday after Mr. Parkyn’s visit he opened fire.

He was the more strongly moved to do this because he had not backed the right horse at Sandown, and saw that the more fortunate Mr. Parkyn, who had, was much struck by his daughter’s beauty, knowledge of equine matters, and proficiency in slang.

Philip Vernham condoned the phrases which passed her sweet lips; Mr. Parkyn enjoyed them. He was even good enough to add a few choice novelties to her store. Further, he so managed her bets that the lady came in a winner by what she called a clear ten pound length.

Altogether, he felt the time was propitious, so as they sat over their coffee after dinner, he hinted gently that he had noticed Mr. Vernham’s admiration for his daughter.

Never was man so taken aback as the incipient millionaire; he colored furiously, he stammered out some vague apology in a manner which might have moved a judge to pity, but did not affect Major Wilton in the least. Instead, that gentleman led him on to confess that he worshipped Miss Wilton as the one particular star at which he had no right to gaze.

He had no excuse to offer. He simply pleaded guilty, and there was an end of the case from the criminal's point of view. Nothing remained save to pass sentence, but this was a ceremony the Major felt too much surprised and disgusted to proceed with.

"Do you mean to tell me," he said, in incredulous expostulation, "that you are actually in possession of no income whatever?"

"I have nothing beyond my salary."

"Which is handsome, no doubt," suggested Major Wilton, searching for extenuating circumstances.

"Quite the contrary; clerks are not paid according to merit," answered the lover with an attempt to speak lightly which would have disgraced a poor wretch with a halter round his neck.

"Just like the service," murmured Major Wilton, apparently under the impression there was no service but his own. "You have expectations, however."

"Yes, I have expectations, or rather hopes, that Messrs. Bricer may raise my salary some day."

"And do you mean to tell me, sir, that without money or expectations you have time after time come here to entrap my daughter's affections?"

Philip Vernham might very reasonably have replied that he had come to Homewood Lodge because of the Major's pressing invitations, but all spirit had died out of him and he sat silent as one condemned.

The Major also sat silent. This result was not what he had expected. If he had spoken his mind he would have said something very strong about swindlers and being swindled, but he felt the end was not yet, and that it might be prudent to keep his feelings under control. There were the Desbournes; there was Ashwater; there was the city; there was Miss Fermoy. "Hang it all," he thought, "there's money when all's said and done. He can't be so badly off. He ought not to be badly off, he need not be badly off if he'd only put his shoulder to the wheel."

He liked the young man. He had sometimes

twinges of conscience, if such an old reprobate could be said to have a conscience, when he looked at his daughter and considered her future if his poor protection were gone forever. Admirers had been hers in plenty, but few indeed were the men who offered themselves as candidates for the honor of her hand. The General had betaken himself off in dudgeon. He was not fond enough of Miss Wilton to forgive two nights running of ill-luck, and Miss Wilton was not fond enough of her father's old friend to have married him, even for a home.

There had been so many disappointments, and here was another. The Major felt he could scarcely bear it with equanimity. Young, good-looking, well born, well mannered, steady, an ideal husband, if only possessed of money.

"No chance of a partnership?" he said, at the end of his reverie.

"Not the slightest."

"No chance of anything?"

"Perhaps, if I pressed for it, Messrs. Bricer might find me a post in South America."

"Then, why don't you press for it. I suppose you would have a chance of doing well out there?"

"Yes; if I did not die, as so many fellows have done, I dare say I should have a chance of getting on."

"Pooh! there's not the least necessity for you to die. Look at me, broiled in the East Indies, stewed in the West, baked on the Gold Coast, and yet here I am hale and sound, younger than many men half my age. You would be quite as safe in South America as in London. Place makes no difference. When once Death has a warrant out for you, it is useless to try to bilk him. There is no country in the habitable globe beyond the reach of his extradition treaty. Terra del Fuego or Tyburnia, Texas or Teddington, it is all one. Death is everywhere, life is everywhere, only money is not everywhere. Go where you can get it."

"If I might only carry hope with me," said the young man, timidly.

"Of course; why shouldn't you? Hope is free to all. If I wished to do so, I could not prevent you from packing up hope in your kit, but I have no wish of the sort. Hope is man's birthright, and I am no Esau. Of course my girl can't marry a pauper, but you are both young. Waiting won't hurt either of you."

"Do I understand," hesitated Philip, "that I—that I—may speak to your daughter——"

The major laughed. "My good lad, you have spoken to her," he said, "in a language comprehended of all peoples, but I can allow no nonsense, no engagement, no marriage till you are very differently situated. You must not come here as you have been doing—it is a thing I can't permit, it is what I should not have permitted had I suspected your real position. Now it will better for you to go; you can think over what I have said. If you were the younger son of a duke I would not treat you differently."

"Indeed, I am most grateful. I could never have expected to be treated so well. May I say 'Good night' to Miss Wilton?"

"Assuredly, but it must be only 'Good night,' till I hear you have set to work to make your fortune."

To secure which desirable abstinence, Major Wilton accompanied his guest first to the drawing-room and then to the hall door, where he "God blessed" his daughter's lover with great fervor before sending him out into the night, and closing the front door after him.

CHAPTER XXVII.

MR. TRIPSDALE'S GREAT-GRAND-AUNT.

Mr. Tripsdale in a low gray hat, light summer suit, and tie to match, was a person to be remembered ; but Mr. Tripsdale in a black hat of the same build, with an adorned mourning-band almost as deep as the crown, black suit fresh from the hands of the tailor, jet studs, and a new black tie, was a spectacle never to be forgotten.

Thus attired he walked into Messrs. Desborne's office on the Monday morning after Mr. Vernham's interview with Major Wilton, and proceeded to hang up his hat modestly, yet after the fashion of a man who, while not exactly proud, realizes the fact that a great dignity having been thrust upon him, he means to comport himself in a manner worthy of it.

"Hallo ! who's dead ?" asked Mr. Knyvitt, who had just come downstairs.

"Not you," replied Mr. Tripsdale.

"You'd be sorry if I were, wouldn't you ?" answered the other.

"If I said yes I should be telling an untruth, but this much I promise, that I'll go to your funeral if it lies in my power."

"That's very good of you, and if you die before me I'll reciprocate the kindness. But who has joined the majority ?"

"That's my affair," was the rejoinder, and no further light was thrown on the matter till some hours after, when Mr. Tripsdale asked if he might absent himself on the following day.

"Do you particularly wish to do so ?" inquired Mr.

Thomas Desborne, to whom he had addressed his petition. "We are very busy at present, as you know."

"I am aware of that, sir, and I should not ask for a holiday were it anything less peremptory than death in question. The fact is, however, I want to attend the funeral of my father's grand-aunt."

Mr. Desborne looked at the speaker with a funny twinkle in his eyes. Mr. Tripsdale and Mr. Tripsdale's manner might have meant that his whole family had been swept off the face of the earth, in which case he could have worn no deeper mourning.

"Were you very fond of your father's grand-aunt?" he asked.

"No, sir; my great-grand-aunt, though a lady possessed no doubt of many attractions, never thought it worth her while to try to attract me, hence arose a coldness on my part."

"Then why do you consider it necessary to attend the funeral?"

"Because my brother and I are the nearest relatives on her first husband's side, and though I cannot affect grief, I should like to show respect. I feel sorry, sir, that I am not sorry, if you can understand what I mean."

"I think I can," was the dry answer. "And at what hour is she to be buried?"

"At a most inconvenient hour, eight thirty to-morrow morning, over forty miles from London. Evidently her relations, who are not our relations, desire to put us to as much inconvenience as possible."

"I should imagine they are in a hurry to hear the will read," suggested Mr. Thomas Desborne, shrewdly.

"Possibly, sir; but whether the old lady has left a will or not cannot affect us in the least."

"You think she has left you nothing?"

"Quite certain she has not."

"By the by, what is your brother doing?"

"Wood engraving, sir." *Art* was a word Mr. Tripsdale never mentioned in Cloak Lane.

"Getting on well?"

"Very fairly, sir, considering. He has always plenty of work."

"I am glad of that. You may have to-morrow. I suppose you can manage to be here Friday morning?"

The mourner intimated that nothing should prevent his appearing at the time mentioned, except sudden death or a railway collision, after which the interview terminated and work proceeded in the clerks' office as usual, where clients were all that day much impressed by the chastened politeness of Mr. Tripsdale's manner and the newness of his clothes; for out of respect to his great-grand-aunt's memory, he never changed his coat all day, though an old one, somewhat gone in color, hung on the accustomed peg, and with a gentle solicitation touched its master each time he drew near.

When the brothers that evening put on their hats, locked their doors and went downstairs, Reginald carrying a small travelling-bag, it seemed to both that a great change had taken place since Saturday morning, when the news reached them.

They were very pale, not at all exultant, and looked as little like men who had just come into money as can well be imagined.

They walked down Curtain Road and so on to Liverpool Street in silence. They entered the booking office, when Reginald said to the clerk, "Two third, return, Bishop Stortford, please," with a gravity which might have impressed that individual, but did not; then they went down the steps, passed through one of the wickets and secured seats, back to the engine.

"Should you like an evening paper?" asked Reginald.

"I do not think you need buy one," was the answer.

"Better to be up in the latest news. We are going into the heart of the country, remember."

"All right," agreed Gus amiably, willing that his brother should be able to astonish the heart of the country.

"We've been very happy, Reggie, haven't we?"

"Happy, why, of course we have ; what made you say that ?"

"I don't know, only money doesn't always bring happiness."

"It does if people know how to use it."

They had the compartment to themselves after leaving Stratford, but they did not speak again till the express had torn through Lea Bridge and Tottenham, and was heading with giant strides for the Marshes.

"Isn't the air sweet?" asked Gus, looking away across the level to Sewardstone and Chingford. "Do you remember the Christmas we went down here after our father died?"

"Shut up, can't you?" retorted Reginald, whose own heart was too full of memories to bear with equanimity even one other being added to the store. "What a winter that was," he added, more gently.

Enfield Highway, Waltham Abbey, Cheshunt, Hoddesden, Broxbourne, Ware, were left behind and then Gus spoke again.

"Reggie, suppose there's anything wrong about that money?"

"How do you mean wrong?"

"That it has been used."

"It has not been used."

"We cannot be sure."

"I am sure. I have seen to it."

"Oh!" said Gus, meekly.

"Did you think?" demanded his brother, descending from the eminence of conscious power to commonplace explanation, "Did you think I was such a soft as to trust old Wrenkin. Oh! dear, no. I took particularly good care to ascertain he had not converted the cash into ducks and drakes. He was greatly hurt, he asked why I was unwilling to trust his word, and I said because if I found his word were not to be trusted, it would be too late to get back our money, though, probably, quite in time to institute further proceedings."

"That was stiff."

"So he seemed to think, but I did not care," and Mr. Tripsdale, sinking back, folded his arms and looked defiantly out at the landscape over which tender evening shadows were beginning to fall.

"It will be rather a long tramp from Bishop Stortford in the dark," he observed at last.

"Yes," answered Gus, and he said no more. All the spirit seemed to have died out of him.

"I know what you are thinking about," remarked Mr. Tripsdale. "You are considering you will have to go to Rome, and that is the best thing you can consider. You'll have to go to Rome, away from London, and Bartholomew Square, and Polly, and me. We are turning over a new leaf, old boy, one on which you've got to write a name and a fortune—if you are able—but a name anyhow; and I have to fit myself for a considerable rise in the social scale, so as not to bring discredit on the brother who some day will be the companion of princes, and must forget all our old pranks and Saturday nights in Hoxton and Stratford Broadway."

"If I do, may I never touch brush again," said the young fellow, passionately.

"Bosh, we've got to forget the days when we dined with Duke Humphrey and supped with—who the deuce did we sup with?"

"Don't talk like that, or you will make me wish the old lady had taken the two thousand pounds with her."

"I believe that is what you are wishing now. Gus, you have no ambition, you love your ease and trodden ways, and down-at-heel slippers far too much."

"All those good things I do love."

"Well, you must cease loving them this hour. You must transfer your young affections to Rome and art and fame and fortune, do you hear me?"

"Yes, I hear you."

"Then let us have no more folly," said Mr. Tripsdale, sternly.

The train rushed on through the darkness as it had rushed through the evening light, till it paused for a minute's rest at Bishop Stortford, where the brothers got out and started to walk the last stage of their journey.

"Is not the smell of the country delicious?" ventured the elder, for he knew Reginald's heart was sore within him.

"It may be, but give me the smell of London," was the uncompromising reply.

They put up at a small inn for the night and made their frugal supper off bread and cheese and ale, "food fit for the gods," observed Reginald; "many a night not so long ago we'd have thought it a feast."

Gus did not answer.

"Be kind enough to have breakfast ready for us at seven o'clock to-morrow morning," said Mr. Tripsdale to the landlady, speaking as one having authority, and then they went to bed, but not to sleep.

"The noises of the country are death to sleep," explained Reginald next day, and Gus never contradicted him.

For the last time they went over to Elder Tree farm, where their reception proved as cool as the weather was warm. Nothing, however, no frigid civility, no unfriendly glances, no lack of ordinary hospitality, could disturb the studied propriety of Mr. Tripsdale's manner. If neither kinsman nor clergyman knew the correct procedure, he did, and nothing they ignorantly chose to do could disconcert him in the least.

Even the undertaker and clerk were nowhere in the ceremony. All eyes were turned on this extraordinary mourner as he stood by the grave, all ears were bent on catching his "amen;" and the way in which, after the funeral service was over and the churchyard left behind, he lifted his hat to the assemblage in token of forgiveness and farewell, struck everyone who beheld with astonishment.

Mr. Wrenkin hurried after him and said, "One mo-

ment, if you please," but Mr. Tripsdale waved him back with dignity and remarked :

"My solicitor is Mr. Ansdell, of Evangelist Court, E. C., to whom any communication may be addressed."

"And well the old sinner knows who is behind Mr. Ansdell, of Evangelist Court, E. C.," he said to his brother as they walked (not at too great a speed, for that would have been a mistake) away from their grand-aunt's children and grandchildren, who did not love them, "who makes the bullets Mr. Ansdell fires, ay, and tells him where to aim."

Gus would have liked to go into Elder Tree farmhouse, and felt sorely tempted to look back at the old place ; but, wiser than Lot's wife, he refrained, otherwise lest some withering sarcasm or scathing glance might transform him into a pillar of salt.

"So closes another chapter in life," exclaimed Reginald.

"Yes," said his brother. "I wish we could have bid them all good-by, I do," he added stoutly. "Whatever they may have been lately, they were kind to us once."

"You make no mistake about that!" returned Reginald ; "if they were ever civil, it was only that they might 'do' us the more effectually. You may thank your lucky stars I know a thing or two. Now about Rome."

"There is plenty of time to think about Rome," was the somewhat pettish reply. "I can't go there in the summer, and what I want to know before I stir a step is this : Will you article yourself at once?"

"I shall take steps to do so certainly, but I can't leave Messrs. Desborne without due notice."

"You can leave them next Saturday week," returned his brother ; "weekly pay, weekly notice."

"In strict law, perhaps, not in honor. As employers go, they have not treated me badly. No, I won't leave them in the lurch like that."

"Well, give them as long notice as you please, only

put the matter in train. I want to see you on the straight road to a good practice now, or else I know exactly what you will do."

"What is that?"

"You will keep grinding away just as you are and not spend a penny of your money, so that I may have it all. I know the wickedness of your heart, I do! You may deceive other people, but you can't deceive me."

They walked a little way in silence, then Reginald said, "On my word of honor I will give notice this week, but you must do your part. No skulking, remember."

"Very well," agreed Gus, and as what Mr. Reginald Tripsdale styled a "steam crawler" stopped at the little town where they had stayed the night, the brothers returned to London in a compartment so full of passengers that happily no opportunity presented itself for continuing the discussion.

During the remainder of the week Messrs. Desbournes' clerk held on his way with a disregard of Mr. Puckle's fishing questions, and Mr. Knyvitt's taunts, in a manner which might have been thought Christian by any one unaware he was upheld not by faith, but by the thought Saturday would see the explosion of a shell in Cloak Lane.

"When they have me no more they will know my worth," he thought; "the bare idea of losing his slave will uncurl Knyvitt's whiskers. Who'll keep things straight in the morning? who'll screen his goings and returnings during the day? who'll run his errands and bear his insolence, always returning that soft answer which makes his wrath worse and drives him to the verge of distraction? Why, no one, ah! he'll mourn for me in sackcloth and ashes, and serve him right too!" he finished, with a burst of triumphant rage which "dimly revealed the vulture tearing at his heart."

In spite of these mental goadings to fury, however, he pursued the even tenor of life in Cloak Lane till

Saturday, when he again sought an interview with Mr. Thomas Desborne.

Very different emotions crowded upon him as he ascended the staircase from those which had filled his heart on that memorable afternoon when he crawled slowly down, breathing forth threatenings against Mr. Knyvitt.

"Then" so ran his reflections, "I was poor and unconsidered, "a very worm for that ruffian of a managing clerk to tread under his feet. Now I am a man of independence, beyond the world, about to shake the dust of Cloak Lane from my shoes, going into pastures new where I can browse at will, and chew at my own leisure the sweet and bitter cud of law, especially criminal law. What a change the snuffing out of one old life has made, and yet—but courage, Reginald."

Reginald had need of all his courage, for, spite of all this grandiloquent bombast, the poor fellow was one of the most simple and affectionate creatures imaginable.

He had a cat's attachment to place, a dog's love for persons; the daily task, the common ground held attractions for him he would have denied strenuously. He liked everyone in his office, even the new elderly clerk and Mr. Knyvitt, spite of the fits of exasperation which the latter individual delighted to provoke. May it be said, if Mr. Knyvitt had not so continually girded at him Reginald Tripsdale would have gone through fire and water to serve the managing clerk, whose "head was screwed on the right way." It was that fact, indeed, which so aggravated Mr. Tripsdale. "If he were a fool, like Puckle, it wouldn't signify, but he ain't."

And now the greatness thrust upon him commanded that he should leave this earthly paradise, tenanted by men who were but a little lower than angels, and go forth among a people who knew not Reginald Tripsdale and were unknown by that exalted personage.

Not like a conqueror did he enter Mr. Thomas Desborne's presence, but rather after the fashion of

some unfortunate devil who, having done wrong, expected and was prepared to receive a wiggling.

"If you please, sir,——" not a dignified beginning, but courteous and fitting.

"Yes," said Mr. Thomas Desborne.

"I am very sorry to say I want to leave."

"What is wrong now?"

"Nothing is wrong, sir, but I have come into a little money, and I think I can't spend it better than in articling myself."

"Oh! then your great-grand-aunt did leave you a legacy after all?"

"No, sir, but I succeeded to a matter of a thousand pounds she has been keeping me out of for seventy-three years."

"For how many years?"

"Seventy-three."

"That is a long time. How did she manage it?"

"My great-grand-uncle, her first husband, left £2,000 to her for life; she was twenty-five when he died. The plate on her coffin said she was in her ninety-ninth year. Take twenty-five from ninety-eight, and seventy-three remains."

"You have gone through that small sum in subtraction pretty often, I imagine."

"I don't deny it, sir, but when the black-edged letter came I was not so glad as I expected to be."

"And now you want to leave us?"

"I do not *want* to leave, at the same time it would be useless to deny I wish to rise in the world. It is natural, sir."

"Perfectly natural, but why can't you begin to rise in this office?"

"I have always had a fancy for the criminal business, sir. The bent of my ability is inclined that way."

"Ah! we cannot accommodate your taste here. It is a pity."

"May I take it, sir, that you will accept this in lieu of a more formal notice?"

"Undoubtedly, and I wish you every success."

"I am sure you do, sir; you have always been very kind to me, and I thank you."

Mr. Thomas Desborne acknowledged this grateful testimony with a deprecatory wave of his hand, and began turning over his papers as a sign that he considered the interview at an end.

The door did not open and close, however, so he looked round to discover the reason, and beheld Mr. Tripsdale standing ruminant, one hand grasping the handle and the other covering his mouth.

"Well?" asked Mr. Thomas Desborne.

"It seems hard to go, sir, after so many years."

"The choice is yours. Surely it is your own free will which severs our connection."

"I know that, sir, but——"

Mr. Thomas Desborne laid down his pen and threw his left arm over the rail of his chair, so as more effectually to get the young fellow within his field of vision.

"I would not be in too great a hurry, Tripsdale," he said, with a softer tone in his incisive voice. "You have given the firm notice, and I have accepted it. So far good. It is right you should wish to article yourself, a laudable ambition never did harm to anyone; but I do not exactly see the sense of your leaving us. I do not care for new faces, even if sometimes I could wish the old were a little different, and though you are far too much given to act the mountebank and overrate your own abilities. I believe you are at bottom a good and honest young man, very fairly clever, and possessing a desirable reserve of common sense. We should have no objection whatever to keeping you on as an articulated clerk. I do not think you will better your position by going elsewhere, and what is more, I do not think you believe yourself that you will better it. Think the matter over, take a week, or a fortnight, or a month, so far as that goes, then let me know your decision. Meantime the affair can remain strictly between ourselves. I will look out for another junior

clerk at once, so that he may be learning his duties ; therefore, whether you go or stay, no one will be inconvenienced. Does my suggestion recommend itself to you ? ”

Mr. Thomas Desborne paused, and Mr. Tripsdale answered, “ Yes, sir, I don’t know what I want.”

“ It is all so new to you,” his principal said, by way of excuse.

“ No, sir, it is not that, for I have had this in my mind for years, and the criminal notion I always did take to.”

“ You could work your criminal notion out afterward.”

“ I did not think of that, but I can’t give an answer now, sir. I will consider the matter, as you are good enough to permit.”

“ Do so by all means, and Tripsdale——”

“ Yes, sir.”

“ Whether you stay or go, be sure we will do all we can to help you.”

“ Now, is not this rough on a man ? ” said Mr. Tripsdale to himself as he went down the stairs, “ when I had braced myself to the sticking-point, too. It is the old fable of the north wind and the sun. If he had only been a bit rough ; but there, perhaps things are better as they are ; any way, I won’t say yes or no yet a while.”

“ What’s up now ? ” asked Mr. Puckle, noticing the signs of thought on Mr. Tripsdale’s brow, and believing they pointed to ‘ *Gloom.* ’ ”

“ Nothing is up so far as I am aware,” replied Mr. Tripsdale, “ but you’ll soon be down if you don’t mind your manners.”

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MR. PARKYN SUGGESTS.

After calm comes storm, a fact which is not generally known, simply because people believe only what they wish to believe. It is the old business of the seven good, and the seven thin and ill-favored kine over again. There was only one man in Egypt who understood that dream, whereas had the lean kine preceded the good, every one's mouth would have been open to prophesy fair things.

For nearly two months after the evening when Aileen made tea for Mr. Desborne, life passed very smoothly at Ashwater. Duns did not make day a perpetual harass, the posts were singularly bare of incidents, no acceptances had to be provided for, no money lenders dined *tête-à-tête* with Mr. Desborne, disparaged his wine, or found fault with his management.

Existence flowed by as quietly as the Thames, sunshine sparkling on its surface, and care lying well out of sight in its depths. After his winter and spring experiences, Mr. Desborne might, perhaps, be excused for imagining every day that passed without bringing some trouble, was a day gained. The calm did not daunt him ; if he thought about it at all, the only idea suggested was that the storm was over and peace come.

He felt better, looked more like his former self, the lines of care were not so marked, his voice had a different ring, his smile was more the smile of old. He had managed to raise enough money to stop the mouths of several importunate creditors. He had thrown many

valued possessions to the wolves, and believed firmly, because he did not hear them, that the wolves were left far behind. He could hold on till help came, help must come ; if those who were his creditors would only keep quiet a little longer, quiet as they had done for so many years, with the exception of that distressing outburst in the autumn and winter and spring, all would be well ; all was well with him during seven glorious weeks when Ashwater put on its fairest dress, and the valley of the Thames looked its sweetest, and in the "enamelled meadows" so rich, so green, cows chewed the cud lazily, and boats with youth at the prow and pleasure at the helm glided over the smooth surface of the river, and songs and laughter floated out into the darkness through the open casements of brilliantly lighted rooms, startling lonely pedestrians as they plodded solitary home by night.

All was very calm, indeed, no threatening of a storm anywhere, no closeness in the air, no dark clouds brooding on the horizon, no lurking lightning, no mutterings of distant thunder ; the worst was past, it was going to be fine weather forever.

The summer had been glorious and most enjoyable. Even Mrs. Desborne confessed that under certain conditions Ashwater might be considered a pleasant residence.

Nowhere are there such confiding husbandmen as those who try to reap golden grain in the Thames Valley. Truly, they are a marvellous people. The credit they will give, the trouble they will take, their patience, their courtesy, their submission to the will of Heaven as expounded to them by persons who rent furnished houses, and keep many servants, and are slow in receiving remittances, and slower still in settling their own accounts, must be seen to be appreciated.

Only one boon they ask of the stranger within their gates—plenty of orders. Not theirs the mean and exploded creed, that it is better to cry over your goods than after them. "Better anything than crying over

them," they exclaim with a generous enthusiasm which does not lead so often to the bankruptcy court as might be expected. Experience has taught that if fish, flesh, and fowl, wine, groceries, bread, and dairy produce are commanded to be sent home, someone must as a rule pay for them some time.

At the first blush this seems an unlikely proposition, but results have justified such faith. Ready money is a pretty notion in theory, but it is one which has been found not to work well in practice, and when once a system is put on its trial and found wanting, common sense endeavors to substitute another likely to prove more successful.

Till that golden summer, Mrs. Desborne had never patronized the Thames Valley fully and freely. Household necessities and luxuries, more especially the latter, ordered in town, were sent down by train, and consequently the neighborhood did not think the Ashwater custom worth having.

Now, as in a twinkling, all that was changed. From the house full of company, no tradesman came away empty of commands for goods to be delivered at once. There was nothing Ashwater did not require and receive from local shop-keepers. What they had not in stock, they procured. No one in all those parts pressed for money; Mr. Desborne did not see the bills, did not know, possibly, of their existence. To a weary time of struggle, a false peace succeeded. July was quite free from anxiety. Mr. Desborne found leisure to run down into Hampshire and inspect the property which he had recommended Aileen to buy. Mr. Thomas Desborne also went to view and approve the purchase, "though why you wish to buy a place so far from London, I cannot imagine," he said to the girl, who only smiled and gave no reason for her strange desire.

She had always been reticent about her Battersea experience, and now she never referred to it. As for Mr. Parkyn, she might have only known him in some

previous state of existence, such guarded silence did she preserve concerning Major Wilton's esteemed friend. When the days for which they had been bidden to Ashwater expired, she went back to York Terrace, and no entreaty could induce her to accompany Miss Simpson when that lady once more sought the shades of Teddington.

"No," she said, "I do not want to go among all those people, but it will make me unhappy if you refuse Mrs. Desborne's invitation. I shall not be lonely at all."

Miss Simpson, though loyal, loved society and knew that it was good policy to keep up and extend her connection; therefore, as Mrs. Desborne had done everything courtesy required in asking Aileen to the house, she yielded after a faint show of resistance, and ran down often to Ashwater, sometimes only for a few hours, sometimes for a couple of days.

In her heart she liked the daughter of the people, Timothy Fermoy's only child, better than any pupil she ever had, but facts are sworn foes to sentiment, and the poor lady had long felt her tenure of office was very insecure. She could not teach the girl much more; indeed, she knew she had scarcely taught her anything. To Mr. Desborne and Miss Wilton attached the glory and honor of having inducted Miss Fermoy into the mysteries of English history, and the way in which to play accompaniment by ear. This was about all Aileen had learned, as far as what Miss Simpson considered an "elegant education" was concerned, and someone would be sure ere long to tell her she might spend money more advantageously than in paying an instructress who had not even discovered she had a nice voice and a very pretty musical taste.

Aileen was marvellously improved in appearance and in manner, it is true, but Miss Simpson could not lay the flattering unction to her soul that changes in these respects were due to her own superior example. The Desbornes had done far more for her in many respects

than she, Miss Simpson. Mr. Thomas Desborne in especial had proved guide, philosopher, and friend, gently correcting her errors of speech and kindly leading along that path of deportment he wished her to follow.

"Were the girl his daughter," thought Miss Simpson, "he could not be more careful for and tender toward her." Which was very true; so true that the lady became sadly convinced her position was too good to be considered safe for any length of time.

Mrs. Surville expressed this opinion openly, influenced, perhaps, by what she called Aileen's "contemptuous" indifference to the advances of persons willing to give her a position.

"Of course she would have to pay for it," said the astute lady, "but nothing in this world is to be had without payment in one shape or other."

Miss Wilton took a cruel pleasure in declaring that Aileen would soon jib at so tight a curb and break over Miss Simpson's traces. Major Wilton observed that without a settled income derived from safe investments it was hard to tell where you were; here to-day, by Jove, and some place very far off to-morrow. Mrs. Desborne, when appealed to by visitors, declined to imagine what the result of Mr. Desborne's singular arrangement might be. So far it had worked better than anyone could have supposed; the girl was amiable and nice, remembering the rank she came from, wonderfully nice and thoughtful; but those sort of people were uncertain, one never knew, there was no dependence to be placed on that class. Miss Fermoy had borne her change of fortune very well indeed, "but she is odd——"

"Gad, I should think so," interrupted Captain Harlingford, to whom Aileen had turned a very cold shoulder.

"Decidedly odd, likes to be alone. I should not wonder if she went a little melancholy—you know."

From all of which utterances containing, she knew, a

certain amount of truth, Miss Simpson felt it would be better for her not to sever her connection with the Harlingfords. They were in the way of hearing of "things," and when one's dividends amount to nothing a year, paid with great regularity, it is unwise to let even the ghost of a chance slip past.

Miss Simpson did not now fear leaving Aileen to her own devices. In the first place she knew quite certainly the girl could never be moulded into the shape of an orthodox young lady of good position and the regulation pattern; in the next she was convinced her pupil would never bring disgrace upon her or anyone else, though she might commit many solecisms and pursue her way without much reference to strict conventionality. Time had taught her to trust Aileen, to depend absolutely on her truth, her promise, and her sense.

If she said, "I will do this," she did it. If she gave an assurance "I will not do that," Miss Simpson knew it would not be done; therefore, when the girl offered to take good care of everything during her absence, Miss Simpson left the house in her charge without fear. She was aware there would be no "high jinks" in drawing-room or kitchen, no festive gatherings, no gay outings, no "sound of revelry by night," or day either, nothing but what was utterly respectable and eminently proper.

If indeed more of the manner and thought which send such a charm to the action of the Upper Ten could have been added to Aileen's proceedings, what further grace could be desired?

"I never saw such a girl as you are," said Miss Wilton, on one of the many occasions when she ran up to town to spend a few hours with Aileen. "I came to-day just because I knew Humphrey Grimsby was entertaining the nobility and gentry at Ashwater, and thought we might have some fun together; but there isn't a bit of spree in you. When the cat is away, Aileen Fermoy won't play. She might be a hundred,

and not a pretty young girl. Come out this moment, I have something to tell you."

"Tell it to me here, then."

"Too good to speak about indoors, but there, if you won't come for a walk or a drive, I know it is waste of time trying to persuade you. What do you suppose my news is?"

"I can't suppose. I have no wish to suppose."

"You disagreeable thing. What should you say if I told you a certain mutual friend was very, very fond of me?"

There came a little flush into Aileen's face, but she answered quietly enough:

"Mr. Vernham. I knew that long ago."

"Did he take you into confidence?"

"No, but I knew."

"How very clever! have you no congratulations to offer?"

Aileen opened her arms and folded the girl in them.

"From my heart I hope you will both be happy," she said, "but oh! Carrie, are you sure you love him enough?"

"Do you mean am I gone on him? No, my dear, I think not. Carrie Wilton is scarcely the girl to gush about a man, let him be what he please. All the same, I like Philip better than anybody who had ever wanted to marry me, and I missed him when the Dad put a drag on his coming and said we were not to be engaged, and all that rot."

"Did Major Wilton say that?"

"Indeed he did, and meant it too, and made me so angry I'd have gone off with Philip, if he had asked me; but no, my gentleman acquiesced and I made sure he was coming here to warm up the old broth again."

"There was never anything between us, never; it was impossible there could have been," protested Aileen, in deep distress.

"Well, we need not go over all that again, for he didn't come to you and no soup was warmed up except

ours. Everything is right now, you dear old thing, we are engaged stupidly and conventionally ; and who do you think we have to thank for it all ?”

“I can’t think.”

“A great friend of yours, a friend who has known a certain young lady for years and years, and has the highest opinion of her, a friend who modestly wants to keep in the background and whose name is not to be mentioned, unless it may be to you ; who has told the governor what a clever fellow Mr. Vernham is, certain to get on, highly esteemed by Messrs. Bricer, who are only waiting old Bricer’s death or retirement to give Phil a partnership, and—kiss me, Aileen, and wish me joy. I never was so happy before, I never expected to be so happy.”

Aileen kissed the sweet face over and over again, but as she drew her lips away she shivered as though she had been pressing those of her own dead love. It had been a living love once, it had taken up its home in her warm, true heart, and now she must bury the pale, fond thing and plant rue and rosemary, and other fragrant plants of memory upon the grave which held all that was left of her foolish affection.

“And who is the friend, Carrie, that set matters to rights,” she asked, after a pause.

“Why, Mr. Parkyn ; who else could it be ? He has been so nice and talks about you in the dearest way. I have my suspicions, grave suspicions, but you are such a shy puss one can never tell. He asked when you would be at Ashwater, and went quite off his feed when I said, ‘Never, very likely.’ I had to eat my words before I could get him out of his corner again.”

Aileen did not say a syllable, but her heart was filled with a vague disquietude. Why should Mr. Parkyn try to advance Philip’s suit ? Yet why, on the contrary, should he not ?

“Mrs. Desborne’s last garden party is to come off on Saturday week,” said Miss Wilton, after a pause.

“So I hear.”

"And you won't come to it?"

"No, I would rather not."

"Philip has accepted."

"I hope you may both have a pleasant time."

"Mr. Desborne will be in Scotland."

"Miss Simpson thinks he needs a change badly."

"And you won't be tempted?"

"No."

"Then do ring for luncheon. I am as hungry as a hunter! You are not very hospitable, after my coming up to spend the day, too!"

Time passed on, and the Saturday when Mrs. Desborne was to give her last and largest garden party was close at hand.

"Won't you change your mind, my dear?" asked Miss Simpson; "it will be a very nice affair."

"I would rather not go," answered Aileen, for the twentieth time.

"I feel so unhappy about leaving you," said Miss Simpson, and I scarcely know how to manage, for Mrs. Desborne wants both the servants from here to help, and if you remain they cannot be spared. Do come, and Mrs. Castle could take care of the house over Sunday. That would enable everything to be arranged satisfactorily."

"And why cannot you send for Mrs. Castle and arrange everything satisfactorily, even though I remain here? She can get all I require, and if she brings her child, she won't feel lonely or be wanting to go out."

"But it would be terribly dull for you on Sunday."

"Not at all, Mr. Thomas Desborne said if I liked he would come up in the afternoon and take me to the service at the Abbey and round to Westminster afterward. I should enjoy that much more than the Ashwater garden party."

"Well, if you really——"

"Yes, I would really, so go whenever you like."

It was late on Saturday afternoon, when the festivities were in full progress at Ashwater, that Mrs. Castle, a

tidy-looking, careworn young widow who had been "servant in a good family," brought Aileen a card and said "the gentleman" would not detain her more than a few minutes.

"Mr. Parkyn!" murmured Aileen, surprised, and went into the dining-room where the visitor awaited her.

"I hoped I might have had the pleasure of seeing you at Mrs. Desborne's party to-day," he said, "but as I heard you were not likely to be present, I thought I would venture to call on you."

Aileen did not say she was glad or sorry, that he was welcome or the reverse, she only uttered the first word which came to her lips, "certainly," and waited.

"It would be affectation for me, in speaking to you, to ignore our former acquaintance," he proceeded. "Of course I knew you in the old Battersea days, and respected you as much as I admired you."

He had always been respectful, and never intended any admiration he may have felt, consequently Aileen did not negative his statement. She only waited as before.

"I admired your industry, your courage, and your patience," he continued, ignoring the fact that the girl had beauty enough to win admiration for other than her mental and moral qualities; "and I am not surprised to find that change of fortune has wrought no change in you, that you are still the same simple, generous, noble creature you were when working so hard to support your family."

"I only did my duty," she murmured.

"Who but yourself would have considered that her duty, I wonder?" he said. "But let that pass. I did not come here to talk about you or myself, only about a person who helped you when you needed help—Mr. Vernham."

"He did help me as no one else ever did."

"And you would wish to make him very happy now?"

"Yes, indeed, if he would let me."

"You know, of course, he is engaged to Miss Wilton. She told you, I believe, and mentioned I had been instrumental in reconciling her father to the arrangement?"

"Miss Wilton said you had been very kind."

"May I say that I busied myself in the matter principally because it seemed to me you would be pleased to have matters put straight. Miss Wilton is not my ideal of perfection, but Mr. Vernham is differently minded, and she will make him a very good, loving wife, I am sure."

"She is very fond of him," remarked Aileen, lingering on the words.

"Very, and I have no doubt he will get on eventually and make money, and so forth; but meantime, ah! in the meantime their youth is passing; youth does not last long, and its brightness and its promise can never come back again. Now, it occurred to me the other day that you might help these lovers, that you would like to help them. I know you would, I am convinced you would."

"How can I help them? Mr. Vernham is not the man to take money from me."

"He would not be the man you have liked all your life, if he were willing to accept money from anyone, but suppose now you settled a little income on Miss Wilton, you would never miss it; apparently you dower the bride, but you actually give the amount to Mr. Vernham—you grasp what I mean."

"That would not do," answered the girl, "he would never marry a rich woman."

"She need not be rich, only possess a small competence to keep the wolf off, you know. Major Wilton might tell him to marry on his present salary and promise to allow his daughter some trifle toward house-keeping. There is no necessity for Mr. Vernham to be taken into confidence. We might practise a pious deception—you won't think well of it, I see. At any

rate, forgive me. My intentions were good, I did not mean to give offence."

"You have not offended me, I feel grateful to you for speaking."

"You relieve me immensely. Any other person might consider my interference officious. I won't detain you longer now, only let me say one word more. If ever you think I can be of the slightest service in this or anything else, let me know and I will help you to the best of my ability. God bless you. Good-by, you have a great heart and a grand nature. Good-by again;" and he went.

Aileen remained where he left her, gazing with unseeing eyes into the Park.

The afternoon waned. Mrs. Castle said tea was in the library, but the girl took no notice; hour after hour she sat thinking, the twilight came and found her still pondering over the problem Mr. Parkyn had put before her. At last, when the trees in the park were scarce distinguishable, when the street lamps were lighted and night was on hand, she roused herself and went into the next room with a look on her face which told she had answered the question of how Philip Vernham might be helped to her satisfaction.

CHAPTER XXIX.

MAN PROPOSES.

"Man proposes," and, for that matter, woman too. Ere Aileen, late at night, sought her couch, she had proposed many things which she meant to carry into execution on the Sunday, when Mr. Desborne intended to conduct her round and about Westminster. She felt quite light-hearted as she went upstairs, a load was lifted from her mind, she saw her way quite plainly. She would *not* settle any money on Miss Wilton, but she would entreat Mr. Thomas Desborne to find some way by which she might make Philip Vernham rich without anyone knowing her share in the work. The peace which perfect unselfishness insures was here, the quiet that after some good act of utter renunciation succeeds the grief and unrest, fell upon her soul, as dew with sweet refreshment drops on parched grass.

If her ideal was not the *one* woman for her friend, if he could only be happy with a girl she liked, nay, loved very much, but whom she could not believe to be the right wife for him, she would try to enable him to marry that girl.

No one can make life for another; no one can see with another's eyes or hear sweet tones in a voice which sounds like softest music to different ears. People must seek happiness in their own way, but she might help Philip to be happy.

What though she had given her heart unsought, she did not mean to be miserable because of that unwilling error. No one knew, no one should ever know; the shame need not weigh her down, nay, rather, she might

always remember, even when old and lonely, she had loved worthily and conquered her love.

Because of it, the fair plains of her life did not lie desolate as though a wind from the desert had swept over and blasted them; on the contrary, they were green with kindly thought and generous purpose, flowers that would make many hearts glad were springing there to blossom in good season.

The widow and the orphan should be her constant care; although she could never have husband nor child, she would strive not merely to weep with those who wept, but, more difficult by far, to rejoice with those who rejoiced. She would not mope and be sorrowful, nay, rather, she would walk on her appointed way, striving to make the world a little better and brighter as she trod. She had not done much as yet, she thought, but she would try to do more. God had given her great wealth which it behoved her to use as a servant, who must one day give an account of how she had employed the talents entrusted to her care.

She was so full of plans and purposes that, although very happy, she could not fall asleep immediately she lay down; the very stillness spoke to her, the silence was full of voices; but at length slumber stole softly down, closed with velvet touch her weary eyelids, laid a soothing hand on her tired brain, and brought sweetest dreams to chase away all sad thoughts that might disturb her rest.

The house was utterly quiet, not a sound from the never-ceasing hum of London penetrated into that peaceful house; in her own room Aileen lay bound in the most perfect repose; upstairs Mrs. Castle and her child were wrapped in deep sleep; the spirit of night brooded over a place in which there was no sickness or sorrow or sin to keep anyone awake; the clock in the hall ticked its solemn warnings to deaf ears, the minutes sped by, hours passed; and then through that quiet dwelling the front door-bell pealed a jarring

summons, waking from cellar to attic every hitherto unsuspected echo it contained.

No one heard the sound, care was not sitting by any pillow to arouse consciousness at the lightest breath; then the bell rang again, a louder, longer alarm.

This time Aileen awoke, wherever she may have been wandering, this second peal followed her through the mazes of dreamland. Faintly she heard, as from afar off, the clamorous reverberation, and between sleeping and waking lifted her head unconsciously, wondering what it might mean. Before she could settle to rest again, the bell was seized as if by some demon, who rang, not once or twice, but such a series of wild summonses that the girl sprang up, thrust her feet into slippers, put on her dressing wrapper, and ran downstairs in the dark, her eyes still heavy with sleep and her heart fluttering, as the bell continued its imperative jangle.

She shot back the bolts, turned the key in the lock, and opened the door as far as a heavy chain would permit.

"What is the matter?", she asked, and a man standing on the step outside replied, "Letter, please, and I'm to take back answer."

"We thought you was all dead," supplemented a policeman, who had evidently been assisting, speaking from the pavement.

"No, we were asleep," returned Aileen, simply. It did not strike her there was anything in the words to cause merriment, but as she closed the door she heard the men laughing loudly. They knew what a fantasia they had been performing on the bell, and her statement struck them as humorous. It was a sign of grace that anything could amuse them under such circumstances.

Not a streak of dawn had appeared in the sky, only that faint gray hung over London which precedes the coming of morning by perhaps an hour. It was that cold, raw hour watchers by the sick dread, and with

reason, and Aileen shivered as she struck a light and looked at the paper she held.

It was an unsealed missive, directed by someone to whom writing was a strange art, to Miss Simsen, care Mr. Dissbon, Yorke Terriss. It was not enclosed in an envelope, the note being merely a page torn from some old account-book and folded roughly so as to hide a few hurriedly scrawled lines.

Aileen turned the curious document over, and seeing "or Miss Furmoi" on the flap, opened it without ceremony and read:

"MADAM, MISS SIMSEN:—"I am sorry to say as Mr. Dissbon is verry bad. He was took about twelf. Please come soon. The docktor wish Mr. Edwharde sent for.

"Yours trewly,
"MRS. KIDDER."

The girl stood for a moment paralyzed. She was still scarcely awake, and the whole thing seemed to her an impossible, yet most horrible, nightmare.

She never could tell afterward how she got upstairs, dressed herself, wakened Mrs. Castle, put on hat and jacket—her hands trembling all the while with cold and fright—ran down into the hall, opened the door once again and passed out into York Terrace, where the cabman was walking up and down, banging his arms across his chest with an energy which would not have disgraced December.

At sight of Aileen he abandoned his athletic exercises, slammed the cab door, whipped the nose-bag off his horse, mounted the box, wrapped a rug round his own person as carefully as though it had been winter, and drove off by those short cuts cabmen patronize.

He cut across the main thoroughfares lying to the north of New Oxford Street and Holborn, never striking those great arteries, however, but bearing by various devious ways ever and ever eastward, emerging at

last from Bull-and-Month Street, close to St. Martin's-le-Grand. Nothing in the whole of her previous life, not even the news of her accession to fortune, had seemed so unreal to Aileen as that drive through the almost silent metropolis, black night struggling against a feeble gray dawn, the gas-lamps flickering as ever and anon a keen blast swept by, every object looking strange and unfamiliar—the quiet streets, the sleeping houses, the closed shops, with a dreadful fear keeping her close company as the cab rattled along to an end where that grim spectre which appals the strongest was keeping a sleepless vigil.

Mrs. Kidder stood on the step waiting when Aileen, who had alighted in Queen Street, hurried up Cloak Lane.

"How is he?" she asked. "He is not——?"

"No, not dead," said the woman, sobbing bitterly, "but he'll never be better. Oh! my poor master, my poor dear master!"

Aileen drew her inside the hall and shut the door.

"Miss Simpson is at Teddington, so I came," she explained.

"His nephew ought to be sent for at once," the doctor said. "I would have done that if I had known the address."

"I know the address, but we could not get a telegram off at this hour."

"Oh! yes, we could, miss, from the chief office."

"Where is that?"

"I am not rightly sure, it used to be in Founder's Court, but any policeman could tell——"

"I will find out," and the girl was turning to go when she stopped to ask, "Is there no hope?"

"No, none, and it will just kill Mr. Edward. I know it will."

"Who is with him?"

"No one—now, he needs nothing, nobody can do anything. I have been in his room ever since he was taken, except when I——"

"Don't try to tell me. Go upstairs, and I will take the key, then you need not come down again. I won't be long."

"Don't, miss, for it's awful and solemn to be in that room all alone."

"But think of what it is for him to be all alone," said the girl softly, depths of feeling before unknown stirring within her soul. "Shall I—would you like me to—I mean, will you let me stay beside him while you go to the telegraph office—if you—feel—afraid——"

"Bless you, no, I'm not afraid of him, poor gentleman. He was always good and kind to me, only it is lonely like——"

Aileen laid her hand on the woman's, she felt in a deadly fright herself, in such a fright she was thankful at the prospect of getting out of the place even for a few minutes.

"I know what it is," she said. "I will be as quick as I can," and she went out into the morning twilight, walking swiftly through the streets he and she, that true friend and herself, had so often trodden together.

She cried all the way, there was no one to see her tears or hear her stifled sobs. She did not meet a creature till she reached Princess Street, when she saw a policeman and told him what she wanted.

When the message was given in, she went back to Cloak Lane running all the way, arriving thus before the tidings had flashed along the wires farther than Edinburgh. She had not told the worst, she meant to supplement that message with another, half an hour later. As it happened, both arrived at the same time, but it made little difference. When and in what way can a man ever be prepared for such a story?

Though we know the inevitable end must come, it always comes with a shock. On the Head of the Firm the news that his uncle was dying fell with more than a shock.

Morning was stealing into Mr. Thomas Desborne's sitting-room, when Aileen, after creeping stealthily up

the staircase, entered that apartment where she had spent so many happy hours. It seemed to her, while she looked around, as though she never before realized what a kind friend the dying man proved from the first day they met, as though she could never be sorry enough not to have thought more of, and done more for, him.

And now she could do nothing save watch beside him. There were the books he had so often taken down, but which he would take down no more; there were the engravings he set such store by, the remembered arm-chair now vacant, the table at which he had written, at which he must have been writing but a few hours before, for a pen lay across a sheet of paper just as it had fallen from his fingers, and a great blot of ink showed as the final stop to his last unfinished letter.

Aileen looked at these things with a grief too deep for tears, too sacred for speech.

Beside the blotting-paper some wills were lying open for anyone to read who listed. From the lock a bunch of keys was hanging. With a great wave, comprehension of the terrible helplessness which attaches to the dead and dying was borne to Aileen's grieved heart, and with the true instinct of sympathy she laid all the papers together and, placing them within the drawer, turned the key and dropped the bunch into her pocket.

"Such things ought not to be lying about," she explained to Mrs. Kidder afterward. "Who knows what may be in those letters?"

"They came by the last post," said the housekeeper. "My master was out and I laid them on his blotting-pad, as was my habit. He did not return till late, and it might have been an hour afterward that, hearing a noise, I ran down-stairs and found him lying on the hearth-rug, as if he had dropped from his chair. He was writing when he was took, and not a soul but me in the house."

"What time will the doctor come again?"

"About eight, miss, but he said he could do nothing more."

"May I not sit with—with Mr. Desborne while you try to get some sleep?"

"I feel as if I'd never sleep again."

"Still, lie down on the sofa here if you would rather not go up-stairs. I will call you, should anything be wanted."

"No, I couldn't rest, miss, but if you will stay with my master I'll make the kettle boil and get a cup of tea ready—and—oughtn't we to send to Ashwater?"

"I was thinking of that. Perhaps we can find a messenger to go there presently."

"Miss Simpson will be in a rare taking. She thought there was not his equal."

"She loved to come here as much as I did," faltered Aileen, almost choked with the memories that crowded upon her.

"Ay, she'd have liked nothing better than to come and stay here altogether," answered Mrs. Kidder, harking back to the original theme. "Well, I've known what was in her mind this many a year, and only I thought it no business of mine, I could have told her there was the picture of a lady hanging in the next room who had been more to him than any other ever would be. It was because she liked his brother better, I've heard, that sent him to live alone and made him the dear gentleman he was; oh! I can't bear to think he's lying in there never to stir about the house again, or to come up the stairs so nimble, and call out my name and——"

Aileen could not bid the woman cease crying, for her own sobs were choking her.

"We shall disturb Mr. Desborne," she managed at last to gasp.

"I wish we were able to do that," was the almost inarticulate answer, which seemed to Aileen so ridiculously inconsequent she could only point to the half-open bedroom door and ask,

"May I go in, or would it wake him?" whereupon

Mrs. Kidder gave way to a fresh burst of grief and said, "No," in a manner which might have induced Aileen to believe the sick man was dead, had not the sound of heavy breathing negatived such an idea.

Very quietly she crossed the threshold and stood for a moment looking at her friend. He had been placed in bed and was lying with his face turned toward her, fast asleep, as she supposed. He did not seem much changed, his cheeks pale but in no way drawn as though in pain. Altogether the girl felt reassured, the room looked so cheerful, the sleep was so profound, his appearance was so much what it had always been, Aileen took heart again. When the doctor came he would see his patient was better, meanwhile she ought to keep very still. There should be no more talking or crying.

Noiselessly she removed her hat and jacket, seated herself at a little distance from the bed, and opening a bible, which lay on a chest of drawers close at hand, tried to read. But she could not concentrate her attention on the text. If she caught one word a dozen raced past her eyes without conveying any meaning. Her mind wandered to Mr. Desborne, and to the portrait hanging above the mantle-piece of a lovely girl in the prime of early womanhood. No need to wonder who she was, to marvel where Mr. Edward Desborne got his kindly eyes and his pleasant smile.

There they were in that charming face which seemed watching with grave sweetness the man who had remained single for her dear sake, and spent the best years of his life working for her son.

Aileen looked at the glory of golden hair, at the exquisite complexion, at the half laughing, half sad expression, till her eyes swam with tears as she considered the faithful heart which had never wavered in its affection but remained unselfishly true to the love of his youth.

Then she thought with a deep compassion of Miss Simpson, and remembering it had been in her mind

to send for that lady, she stole very quietly into the next room and wrote a note, which she was just putting in an envelope when Mrs. Kidder entered, bringing a cup of tea which Aileen swallowed before returning to Mr. Desborne's bedside.

"Lie down and get some sleep," she whispered to the housekeeper, who, though sure she could "never sleep again," when she sat down before the fire in her own kitchen fell into a profound slumber, which even the doctor's arrival failed to disturb.

Aileen let him in, and when he asked about Mr. Desborne, said, "He has not stirred, he sleeps very soundly."

"I wish he were sleeping less soundly," was the answer, "but I can do no more."

"Should you—like—to have another doctor?" asked Aileen, misunderstanding his meaning.

"Would you," he returned.

"I am sure his nephew would wish everything done," she hesitated.

"Then I will bring a physician."

"Thank you, and would you please get a messenger to take this note to Teddington?"

"Has Mr. Desborne not been sent for?"

"I telegraphed to him long ago."

"Where is he?"

"In Scotland."

The doctor, a man of few words, made no comment. He took the note and went away and Aileen resumed her watch.

The silence was profound and broken only by Mr. Desborne's labored breathing.

"He sleeps very, very soundly," thought the girl again, and she wondered what the doctor had meant by his answer to that observation. The quiet soothed her, the loud, monotonous respiration caused her no alarm; possibly he would sink into a more natural slumber after awhile. It was too early for the clang of church bells, no sound of train or cab reached

that quiet room. Aileen's own senses seemed to get dull, she was conscious of falling into little dozes and waking with a start. She did not wish to be a negligent nurse, so crossed the room and bathed her face with cold water, then she took a little turn and looked out of the front windows and came back refreshed.

As she stood for a moment by the bedside looking at Mr. Desborne, he moved and seemed trying to raise his head.

Aileen slipped her hand under the pillow and lifted him up a little. Then he was seized with a terrible fit of shivering, during the continuance of which the girl felt her whole body shake with his violent trembling. She did not know what to do, she had no experience to guide her, she could not withdraw her arm, she was afraid to call out. She felt her strength failing, just when Mr. Desborne gave a deep sigh and his head sank back with the movement as of one seeking repose.

Aileen let the pillow sink gently and drew the bed-clothes close up under his chin. She saw his eyes were open, they had not been so before, except when the doctor pulled up one lid and looked earnestly at the pupil.

She smoothed the counterpane and, walking on tip-toe to the window, lowered the blind so that no glare of light might disturb her patient.

At that instant she heard a conveyance stop, and ran down-stairs so quickly that the doctor had not time to ring the bell.

"How is he now?" was his inquiry.

"He is awake, I think, but very quiet. Will you come up and see him?" and she led the way while the two doctors followed silently.

They all passed into the room. Mr. Desborne was lying as she had left him.

The physician looked at the rigid figure, placed his hand on the forehead, felt for the wrist and put his fingers on it.

"My poor girl, you ought to have some one with you," he exclaimed, "your father is dead."

"Mr. Desborne was not this young lady's father," explained the other doctor in a low, hushed tone, and he closed the sightless eyes and laid the sheet reverently over the quiet face.

CHAPTER XXX

THE

"Death" was the news which awaited Mr. Desborne when, travel-stained and weary, he entered the old house in Cloak Lane. All night long he had been oscillating between hope and fear, and yet the end had come before his journey began.

"God bless you, Ned. Good-by!" were the last words his uncle had said when they parted in the office. He now passed on his way to that upper chamber where the kind old man lay. He would never bid him good-by nor welcome him back again—never praise nor blame, never help nor interfere, never advise nor mis- take the position any more!

Already needful matters had been attended to, and when Mr. Desborne entered the bed-chamber he found a coffin there and Miss Simpson keeping watch beside it.

"There was no choice," she said, apologetically, as she sidled from the room, but Mr. Desborne did not hear or see her. His eyes only took in that last grim piece of furniture man requires, his ears only heard the silence with which the feet of Mortality's King are shod.

That was an awful hour for the Head of the Firm. As he stood there in an agony of grief and self-reproach, he would have given all he had all he ever hoped to have, to see his uncle alive and well before him, and yet—

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FAITH.

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That was an awful hour for the Head of the Firm. As he stood there in an agony of grief and self-reproach, he would have given all he had, all he ever hoped to have, to see his uncle alive and well before him, and yet—and yet—!

So feel those who sell themselves for that which profiteth nothing, who give post-obits, and look forward to wearing dead men's shoes.

Still Edward Desborne had loved the kindest uncle that ever lived, nay, he loved him never better, perhaps, than when he stood looking at the white, passionless face, at the lips on which Death had set a seal, at the crossed hands and the shrouded figure, and the flowers laid to wither by two who would "not forget."

It is bad enough to covet money for money's sake, but it is quite as hurtful to desire money for what it can buy or pay.

When all is said that can be said, there is not much to choose between the miser and the spendthrift. They both crave for money, and the craving for money is, indeed, "the root of all evil."

While he stood looking on the change death had wrought, Mr. Desborne was ignorant of the way in which death came, but when, after a long time, he went into the front room Aileen told him.

"The right-hand drawer was open, so I locked up everything I found on the table, here are the keys."

That was all. Silently she left him, and after one more look at the dear, dead face, she took Miss Simpson's hand and the two women left the house. They had done their work, neither the dead nor the living needed them any more, then.

Meanwhile Mr. Desborne, feeling something, he knew not what, in the way of unpleasantness might be associated with those papers which were lying before his uncle when Death, coming from out a darksome corner, struck life that fatal blow, opened the drawers and drew forth the blotting pad Aileen had placed in safety. As he did so, two envelopes with enclosures and an unfinished letter fell to the ground. Mr. Desborne picked all up, looked at the envelopes, changed color, sat down again, pulled out the enclosures, and saw two heavy bills and two notes, one of which ran as follows :

"SIR: Having frequently asked for payment of account forwarded herewith and failed to obtain a settlement, I beg to say that unless a satisfactory answer is returned in the course of next week, I shall be compelled to place the matter in the hands of my solicitor. Before adopting extreme measures, however, I have decided to apply to you, as I feel loth to have a writ served on the son of a gentleman I so much respected, as I did your brother, the late Mr. Desborne. If you will kindly notice the time over which my bill has been running, I do not think you can say I have erred on the side of impatience.

"Trusting to hear from you at an early date,

"I am, sir,

"Your obedient servant,

"JOHN MACKILL."

The other communication was to like purpose, but perhaps a little more peremptory.

Mr. Desborne felt heart-sick, and he closed his eyes for a moment before facing his uncle's unfinished message.

"My dear Edward," so the letter, which the dead man had meant to be a long one, began: "My heart has been broken to-day, and by you. I went this evening to dine with my old friend Darter, at Haverstock Hill. There I met Meggiton, who walked to the station with me. Before we reached it I learned you had sold the little Croydon property (24 cottages) I assisted your father to buy for your benefit, a capital property, returning over twelve per cent. Meggiton added, he heard you were parting with your other leaseholds. You may imagine how this shook me, for although I have long known you found your income barely sufficient, it never occurred to me you were trenching on capital. Worse, however, was to follow. When I returned home two letters were awaiting me, enclosing bills for an appalling amount. If you have further liabilities on a similar scale, I see no resources for you but

bankruptcy or a private arrangement with your creditors.

"Pray return as soon as possible, and let us look matters in the face, so that, if possible, a public exposure may be avoided, otherwise the firm cannot last so long as the lease of these offices, short as the latter is.

"It is quite impossible I——"

At that point there was a great blot. The pen had fallen forever. What more the writer meant to add was gone with him into eternity, and for a moment it seemed to Edward Desborne that his own feet were treading the border line, his eyes straining themselves over the space that divided this world from the land whither we are journeying.

He felt as one who runs breathlessly after some vanishing figure that can never be overtaken. Pant and struggle as he might, he could not reach the beloved and lost and fall at his feet and say :

"I have sinned against Heaven and before thee." No, rather his was the case of that other who, turning too late and finding darkened windows and closed doors, exclaimed, in an agony, "I'm a murderer!"

The unhappy man knew as well he had killed his uncle as though he had plunged a knife into the faithful heart and seen the blood gush out.

"May God forgive me, for I can never forgive myself," he moaned, covering his face with his hands, while a grinning demon rose up with mocking gesture and whispered, "You will never know harass again! You may snap your fingers at the world. For the first time you are really Head of the Firm. You will come in for all he left and may do what you please with it."

But this demon could not be tolerated. Imperiously, Mr. Desborne thrust it back to that lower hell from whence it came. His repentance was very sincere, his anguish quite true. He did not know how to contain himself, how to bear the blow. Death is always hard enough to face, but when it brings self-accusation and

self-reproach how is the awful presence to be supported?

This man broke down utterly. He went again into the inner chamber and gazed through blinding tears at the calm, set face, then he sank on his knees and gave way to a passion of unavailing grief, pouring out the words of love and sorrow, repentance and gratitude.

But the dead lay quiet, the time for affection was gone by, and money or the lack of it would trouble his peace never more.

The city was greatly edified by the way in which Mr. Desborne's loss touched him. Mrs. Kidder told every one she had said from the first how it would be. Mr. Knyvitt in his heart thought such regret all bosh, but even he did not believe there was any sham about the matter, though why a man should be sad, puzzled him consumedly. He was not sad, though he went about with a decent gravity. He felt sure Mr. Thomas Desborne had remembered him to the tune of of a cool "thou" at any rate. Mr. Packle, who expected nothing, maintained an impartial attitude, the new clerk was selfishly sorry, while Mr. Tripsdale covered himself with glory by contributing a thoughtful tribute in the form of a magnificent wreath, from "one who knew his worth and felt grateful for his kindness." No other employé did this, and Mr. Knyvitt could have gnashed his teeth when he heard his old enemy had been "one too many for him."

It was a great funeral which wound its way from Regent's Park to Highgate Cemetery. From far and near friends gathered out of respect to the dead man's memory and the great wealth he must have left to his nephew.

People talked about his wealth as they went home and estimated it differently, but all were agreed the Head of the Firm had come in for a good thing, and the Head of the Firm himself, who had recovered a little from the shock, thought so also.

For the time being there was silence, not ominous,

amongst Mr. Desborne's creditors. Here was long-awaited-for come at last. They had always known their trust not to be misplaced. There was money which must turn in, and now they would have it.

Days elapsed after the funeral before the Head of the Firm could bring himself to unlock the small safe containing his uncle's private papers. As the door swung back it seemed to him like opening a grave, and he stood still for a moment ere pulling out a drawer where he knew Mr. Thomas Desborne, in addition to his cheque and pass books, kept a certain japanned box, the contents of which he had never seen.

This he lifted out, placed on the table, fitted a key to the lock, and threw back the lid. A strange, sweet odor floated out into the room, which came from a packet bearing a date in the forties. It contained a glove, once white, now yellow with years, etc., a few dried-up flowers, nothing else save the romance of a life, once fresh as the buds *she* wore, now even more dead than they.

Ah! friends, could we but see the faded flowers hidden away in many a heart we might well be tender to one another!

Mr. Desborne refolded the paper and laid it reverently in its place ere he took out a larger package, labelled "The Last Will of Thomas Desborne." When he broke the seal and undid the envelope a letter met his eye. It was addressed to "My Dear Nephew," and explained, in very lucid language, that the writer was only able to bequeath a comparatively small amount, because he had for years assisted his brother to complete various purchases which seemed desirable in the interests of his son. "Since my brother's death," continued Mr. Desborne, "I have drawn scarcely any money from the profits of the business, permitting, as I have more than once explained, almost the whole of my share to be paid into your account.

"My expenses were trifling, yours, naturally, were large, and I felt very glad that long habits of economy

enabled me to add a substantial amount to your income. I merely mention the fact again, as otherwise you might naturally wonder at the comparatively small income I am leaving you. My will is of the simplest. With the exception of a very few legacies, everything I possess goes to you who are most dear to me.

"I write this while strong and well, because no man knows when he may be summoned to depart."

Then there followed a few words of farewell, and—the large inheritance had melted away.

Ten minutes previously it was tangible to Mr. Desborne's imagination, to his belief its existence was real. Now, however, not the mists of early morning, not the birds in last year's nest, not the wreaths of previous winter's snow were less substantial than this goblin gold, which, as it turned out now, had been a mere vision of the night.

As a man stunned Edward Desborne sat motionless, looking on the shipwreck of his expectations, the downfall of his fortunes, like a "dreamer in a dream."

Who had deceived him? No one save the jade Hope, and that arch-liar Common Report. Over and over his uncle had said, I cannot afford this or that. My income is small, but sufficient, so I will only take so much out of my share and the remainder may be useful to you. The never-ceasing consideration, the unasked-for generosity had never been fully appreciated, since he believed it was out of abundance, not comparative poverty, he received so much. Because his uncle lived in two rooms, gave with modest liberality, and forebore to take the world into his confidence, that world concluded his wealth must be enormous, while he, who ought to have known better, followed suit, believed all rumors, idle tales, and lived, and spent, and threw away his chances as royally as though lord of a hundred manors.

No one but himself to blame! Truly a noble consolation, a splendid excuse to offer in lieu of cash to those who had trusted to his honor.

Many an anxious heart took its sad and tortured way home that evening, but it may be doubted whether one more utterly crushed than this unfortunate man's left the city. For he had never meant to do wrong—it was not out of malice premeditated he waded into such waters of difficulty. He always told himself he would pay; till that afternoon he believed he could pay, and now, utterly hopeless, utterly swamped with debt, he was going to Waterloo, fully determined to tell his wife all and say, “My only hope for the future is that you will help me to retrench—without your aid I am powerless!”

A number of persons were hastening to one of the platforms as he entered the station. A Thames Valley train was on the eve of starting, and he followed the rest of the passengers and jumped into a smoking compartment, though he knew he could not be left nearer Ashwater than Strawberry Hill. What did it signify? he should like the walk to Teddington. The whole evening was before him. Ten minutes would suffice to say what he meant to say.

But when once Waterloo was left behind his courage began to ebb. His wife would not like the confession, would think him hardly treated, might even speak as if his uncle had done him a wrong. That would be very bad, and if she mentioned the actual position to any of her friends, it was difficult to say what injury might ensue.

A man's credit is as a woman's character, a breath suffices to sully it, and Mr. Desborne's credit was unhappily not in a state to defy suspicion.

“If I were bankrupt,” he thought, desperately, “it would not matter. She would have to know, every one would know.” And then the reflection rushed over him that bankruptcy was a horrible thing, that a man had to say why and wherefore, to answer, to the best of his ability, where the money had gone, how much had come in, how much was paid away—a catastrophe too horrible to contemplate, ruin at the time, ruin in the time to come.

He was not one of those men who rise superior to that small misfortune of insolvency—who from the ashes of failure soar phoenix-like triumphant to success. In fancy he saw the bankruptcy messenger entering into possession, heard his own impotent answer to the official receiver, listened to the measured accents of Mr. Registrar Tryford denouncing the debtor's unbridled extravagance and——

“It is a fact. Of my own knowledge, I tell you, he netted seventy-six thousand pounds over that last great fall in ‘Terra Dela.’”

There were but two gentlemen in the compartment besides Mr. Desborne, and it was one of them who spoke.

“God bless me!” said the other.

“I asked him how he managed; we are very intimate, you know; there’s not a bit of nonsense or false pride about him.”

“And how did he manage?”

“I knew it was only a scare,” he said, “and I instructed my broker to buy all the Terras he could lay hands on. If he had followed my orders implicitly I might have made double, but I have no reason to be dissatisfied.”

“I should think not,” remarked the second traveller, a hungry-looking man with an anxious eye and a starved mustache, “but it was a great many eggs to put in one basket.”

“His instinct is *unerring*,” was the reply, “that is only one instance out of many. Fortunes are made every day in the city, and not by accident. Faith is the great thing, faith is what does it.”

Mr. Desborne heard. If faith were the only thing needful, who could supply a larger quantity of that article than he? On the whole, it might be better to defer the proposed conversation with his wife.

CHAPTER XXXI.

POOR AILEEN.

In common justice it must be said that Mr. Desborne, adding works to his faith, did make a gallant effort to set his affairs in order.

He faced his liabilities, so far as he knew, then paid some of his creditors in full, some partly in cash, and partly in promises, and took measures calculated, he hoped, to prevent the recurrence of two such crises as had driven him to the verge of distraction. He placed his town house in the hands of an agent with the view of letting it furnished, either for the winter or a term, inducing his wife to face the prospect of remaining at Ashwater by the assurance that whenever she wished, they could run up to town and stay at the Métropole.

"The house is a great and useless expense," he said.

"All houses are," she answered, for indeed nothing would have pleased her better than to reside always at a hotel.

This move necessitated some change in the Aileen arrangement, but that difficulty was met by an invitation to Ashwater, "where we will be very quiet this winter," explained Mrs. Desborne. As for Miss Simpson, all places were alike to her now. She had "loved and lost," and the solitudes of Teddington and the deer-park at Bushy presented congenial tracts of desolation for her fancy to roam over the might-have-been.

Mr. Desborne devoted himself to business with a whole-hearted persistency which won the approval of every client who in those days sought his assistance.

Even Aileen saw how much he was changed—more grave, more earnest, more lawyer-like.

Into the business of helping Philip Vernham he entered so completely that before November came that gentleman had been offered a small share in Messrs. Brickers' house, with the assurance that it depended entirely on himself whether he should not eventually secure a larger interest in the firm.

Money can do a great deal. Old Mr. Bricker, full of years, experience, and a determination to take every care of his own interests, was going to retire, and thirty thousand pounds in ready money proved useful to a firm, well aware that Mr. Bricker, senior, meant a large amount of capital to go with him when he left the Minories. The whole affair required careful handling, but Mr. Desborne proved equal to the situation. It was necessary for Mr. Vernham to remain in ignorance that money was being paid for him, and it was needful for Messrs. Bricker to remain bound by that money. Many a discussion was held at Mr. William Bricker's private house, but at length matters were so satisfactorily arranged that Philip became "actually, actually," as Miss Wilton said, "a partner in that great big swagger house," and Major Wilton thought, if things went well, the marriage might come off just before Goodwood.

Mr. Parkyn was absent, abroad for his health, or some other reason, and Teddington did not see him till every pleasure boat was off the river, and all the summer holiday-makers were back in town, working hard on the treadmill of society or of business.

When Major Wilton's "capital fellow" heard the news, heard how straight his tip had proved, how thoroughly correct his card, he smiled modestly and congratulated every one concerned.

"Generous as usual," he said to Aileen, the first time he found a chance of speaking to her alone. "I wonder if there ever were another woman so generous as you."

Life could not be considered wildly gay at Ashwater, and as Mrs. Desborne found even her indulgent husband unwilling to take up a permanent residence at the Métropole, or any other hotel, she was wont to welcome Major Wilton and his occasional guests as some little break in the monotony of her existence.

"We must make some change after Christmas," she thought, "I could not go on in this way."

Meantime, Miss Wilton was constantly at Ashwater, while Major Wilton, Mr. Parkyn, and others, dropped in often for a friendly chat and a game of whist, when half guineas were freely staked and generally won by the gallant officer, who often forgot his partner might expect a share of the spoil.

In these dissipations Mr. Parkyn was wont most amiably to take part, losing quite recklessly, and finding himself well repaid by the chance of an occasional word with Aileen. To the Major, indeed, it was clearly apparent that the girl might become Mrs. Parkyn any day she liked.

"Go in and win, my boy," he said to his friend, "you may go farther and fare worse. She has plenty of Bone if she have no Blood, and Bone's the thing nowadays. Gad, if I were thirty years younger, I'd have a try myself."

Backed by which encouragement Mr. Parkyn had a try and was refused, gently, it is true, but with a certain stiffness. Offers of marriage had been plentiful that year, and Aileen had grown a little tired of them. The right man did not come, and what young woman feels inclined to listen to the wrong one?

"It will make no difference, I hope," said the suitor, trying to smile. "We can still be friends, I have always tried to be one to you," and Aileen answered, "he had been very kind;" she was thinking of his suggestion that she should help "the young people to marry." All the same, she knew she never trusted Mr. Parkyn, and never should. She was a true daughter of the people, and as such depended on her instinct.

Still, at intervals the whilom lover came to Ashwater as a friend. He did not now seek sweet opportunities for secret words, but he talked freely to her as to others, and might have been her grandfather, so little did her presence affect him.

One evening, in the early part of December, he accompanied Major Wilton in order to have that pleasant game the officer enjoyed, and of which perhaps his finances had need.

Mrs. Desborne never played; Aileen did not know how; Miss Wilton knew, but always refused to join. Mr. Desborne was dealing, and Major Wilton looking hungrily at the stakes, when Mr. Parkyn, turning to Aileen, said :

“By the by, I see a young friend of yours has got into serious trouble.”

“What friend?” asked Aileen, unadvisedly.

“Your brother. Dick, as you were in the habit of calling him.”

“I have no brother.”

“Well, your step-brother,” returned Mr. Parkyn, sorting his cards.

“He is not my step-brother.”

“How very particular you are. Mrs. Fermoy’s son, at all events.”

“And how has Mrs. Fermoy’s son got into trouble?” asked Major Wilton, who was disgusted with his hand.

“Oh! only a little burglary; he was always a bad boy. It is your lead, Major.”

No one spoke, no one asked a question, no one even looked at Aileen; every one tried to appear as though not a word had been heard, but all present felt as if the ground were rent open at their feet.

At the first opportunity Aileen slipped from the room. When it was clear she did not mean to return, Mrs. Desborne laid her hand on Mr. Parkyn’s arm and, interrupting the game, asked :

“Will you kindly tell us the meaning of what you said just now about Mrs. Fermoy’s son.”

"I ought not to have spoken," he answered; "but as we are all friends here——"

"All friends, of course," agreed the Major. "The trick is mine, Parkyn."

"All right. The fact is, Mrs. Desborne, this young fellow has never been over-honest, and in this evening's paper I see he was to-day brought up at Wandsworth police court on remand, and committed for trial. Good thing Miss Fermoy cut them all."

If it had been midsummer instead of midwinter, Aileen could not have felt the heat of the room into which she locked herself more insupportable than was the case. Her head seemed on fire; her hands burned like one in a fever. She flung wide the window and leaned out, but the night air could not cool her cheeks, the silence soothe such a passion of shame and grief and impotent fury as surged through her breast. This was the man's revenge, this was what he had been waiting for, and "what harm did I ever do him?" thought the girl.

Some one tapped at her door, and Miss Wilton said, "Aileen, darling, let me in, I want to speak to you," but she took no notice, and the girl, after making another effort, went away.

Presently Major Wilton's voice sounded in the hall, the visitors were going. It was a fine night, and Mr. and Mrs. Desborne walked with them as far as the postern gate, which cut off a piece of the road home.

Aileen heard them walking beneath her window, then the noise of their footsteps died away, and the sad moan of the stream fell on her ear. How happy she had been when she first knew the reason of that continuous murmur, but "she would never be happy again," and the girl's eyes filled with tears, drawn from the deep self-pity of youth.

By and by, through the night came the sound of Mr. and Mrs. Desborne returning; nearer and nearer they drew till they passed close under where she knelt, her head resting on the window-sill.

Mrs. Desborne was speaking passionately, more angrily than Aileen thought she could speak.

"You *must* rid me of her," she said. "From the first I objected, as you know, but now I insist on her leaving. I cannot and will not endure the disgrace of having such a person in the house."

She had paused for an instant to give emphasis to her words, and now went on again. Mr. Desborne tried to speak, strove to expostulate, in vain. Mrs. Desborne recommenced the story of her wrongs, but Aileen heard no more. Husband and wife turned the corner of the house and came in through the hall-door. Then there was silence.

Aileen did not pause; she made up her mind. She did not stop even to bathe away the traces of tears, she shot back the lock, ran down-stairs, and re-entered the room she had left about half an hour previously.

Mrs. Desborne was sitting in an armchair, Mr. Desborne was standing beside the fire, Miss Simpson was rolling up her knitting; the picture photographed itself on Aileen's brain, many and many a time in after years it recurred to her, though she was not aware she saw it then.

"I want to tell you, ma'am," she began, addressing Mrs. Desborne in her soft, low voice, reverting to the old form of speech Miss Simpson had tried so hard to correct, "that I am going to-morrow. I thought I'd like to bid you good-by, and thank you for all kindness, and ask your pardon for bringing the talk of disgrace under your roof. I ought never to have come here, but it is too late to undo that now, and — I — think — I'll say no more." Her words trailed away and she turned to leave the room.

Mrs. Desborne had risen and so had Miss Simpson, but both were too much surprised to speak, therefore it was Mr. Desborne who, inexpressibly shocked, exclaimed :

"You poor, dear child," while trying to detain her.

But Aileen put him aside and, saying gently, "please don't, sir," passed into the hall, followed by Miss Simpson who, touched to the heart, had made up her mind to follow the girl wherever she went.

CHAPTER XXII

IN THE EMBANKMENT GARDENS.

They went abroad for some months, and returned home at the beginning of May. During that time they visited Biarritz, Hyeres, Monte Carlo, Nice, and Rome, which were all of course, as new worlds to Aileen. They might have remained longer in each place, and perhaps taken up their residence altogether on the continent, but for the fact that Miss Simpson's knowledge of any language save her own was of that somewhat common description which, though useful, not to say impressive, in English home-life, proves totally unserviceable when employed in peaceful warfare, among the natives of a foreign state. Though her linguistic abilities were so great that she could actually read Moliere and a little of Dante in the original, without a dictionary at her elbow, the lady quite failed to make her wishes understood when those wishes soared above a railway ticket, something to eat, and a room wherein to sleep. The further she and her companion travelled the worse grew their state, and Aileen, quite weary of being informed by her friend either that she did not exactly understand or that the people to whom she essayed to talk could not comprehend at all, felt very thankful when she saw England once more.

She had thought out her plans for the future and decided to try whether her little estate in Hampshire might not prove a pleasant residence.

"We can take lodgings for a few weeks in London," she said, "and buy furniture and different things," and the notion seemed delightful to Miss Simpson, who

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knew she need never now dread being turned out in the cold to starve or look for a situation. Aileen had told her to ascertain what an annuity would cost, and handed her money to buy one.

“With as little fuss as though she were only giving me a knitted scarf,” remarked the poor lady to Mr. Desborne. “She said she wanted me to feel free to leave her if I liked, as though I should ever like to leave so sweet a creature.”

They spent some delightful weeks in London shopping, going to places of amusement, seeing all the sights; foreign travel had rubbed a good deal of insular rust off Aileen and taught her a much-needed lesson, viz., that it is well for a woman to get into the habit of enjoying herself. There was no reason why she should not do so—she had youth, she had money, she had lost her dread of the Callorans, she had done her best to help the whole family, tried to act generously by her father’s widow. By being miserable she could benefit no one, the joy-bells of life were ringing for her, ringing loud and clear. Why should she shut her ears to them? Why mope indoors while the sun of youth was shining? Why not try to find a place and fill it with sweet content, a place, say in Hampshire for part of the year, in London or somewhere else for another portion. Why not search out masters who could teach her a little of the speech of other countries? Why not get somewhat more like other people and shake herself free from those terrible memories of uncongenial association and weary work and ceaseless anxiety, that had so long weighed down her spirits and made her feel almost ashamed when people spoke kindly to her?

Yes, she would do all these things, and so she went about buying and sight-seeing and watching the brilliant spectacle that London in the season presents. To Miss Simpson’s inexpressible delight she hired a carriage, and they drove daily almost in the park and saw beautiful women and lovely girls and good-looking

men, and celebrities, and notorieties, and all sorts and conditions of people from Royalty down to Royalty's meanest subject.

One thing, however, Aileen did not do—visit: because she had no one to visit. That fact, however, troubled her but little. Society might come in time; she thought she would like best to form friends in the country.

Miss Wilton came up and shopped and drove and saw sights with them in the most affable manner possible. Major Wilton called and made himself most agreeable.

"We've lost the Desbornes—I suppose Carrie told you?" he said, when he had accepted a cup of tea from Miss Simpson's fair hands and declared it was just like old times.

"We only just saw Miss Wilton on Tuesday," exclaimed Miss Simpson. "She is going to give us a long afternoon next week—what were you beginning to say about the Desbornes?"

"Oh! he has let or sold Ashwater, could not waste the time travelling up and down between us three. I think he did a wise thing. Madam was going the pace, running up bills everywhere, in debt all round the neighborhood, Richmond, Kingston, Twickenham, and the rest of it. How some people get such credit I can't imagine, but the Harlingfords are famous for that sort of thing. If Desborne had not a princely income she'd have ruined him long ago, I assure you," and the Major set down his cup that he might the better give expression to several choice bits of gossip which referred to Mrs. Desborne's extravagance.

"He looks very ill," commented Miss Simpson.

"Never got over his uncle's death, highly creditable and so on; besides, he works too hard and——"

"And when is the wedding to be?" asked Aileen as a distraction.

"July," was the answer. "In August I leave the house to our young folks. Any place will do for me,

and Vernham likes Homewood. He intends to pay a fair rent of course, doing so splendidly he can afford that, and there is nothing like business after all. Set a concern going and it rolls along of itself!"

"Where are the Desbornes now?" asked Miss Simpson.

"York Terrace again, and just as well there as anywhere. What does a lawyer or a lawyer's wife want with fashion? If Mrs. Desborne wanted fashion she ought not to have married a lawyer. Seen Vernham yet?"

"He was here yesterday evening."

"Looks well, doesn't he, and happy, eh?"

"He does indeed," said Aileen, to whom the observation was addressed.

"He'll find no nonsense and extravagance about Carrie. She can ride a horse, drive a horse, make an omelet, and mix a cocktail better than any woman in England, and that's the sort of wife for a rising young fellow—but then, she has been well brought up."

Happy Philip Vernham, partner in a fine business, which was "merrily" rolling along, "engaged to the prettiest girl in England, who had been well brought up, could ride horses, etc.," having opened and digested his letters one bright forenoon in June, was glancing over the *Times* when a clerk entering handed him a telegram.

"Reply paid, sir," he said, and waited.

Mr. Vernham opened the envelope and read:

"Can you meet me at one, Charing Cross Station Embankment? Reply. FERMOY."

"Yes," he wrote, and re-read the message. "I wonder what she wants," he thought, but he did not think about the matter irritably. Aileen had asked him to do so little for her ever, and had been willing to do so much for him, he could not have refused any request she preferred. Still he marvelled. "Some fresh difficulty about those Callorans, no doubt," ran his mental solution.

Aileen was waiting for him, looking very pale and greatly troubled.

"You want me," he said, "and I am here. What has gone wrong?"

"Let us go into the Gardens, we can talk more quietly," she answered. They went into the almost deserted enclosure walking side by side, she not looking at him but he looking at her and thinking, faithful lover though he was, how sweet and refined she had grown, what a marvellous change prosperity had wrought in her appearance, though not in her heart.

"Shall we sit down?" she asked. He assented, and they sat down.

"Tell me what it is," said Philip, in a voice full of concern. She did not speak immediately, so when she found her voice it was to inquire, irrelevantly, he imagined, "Have you seen Caroline lately?"

"I saw her on Saturday. Why?"

Aileen sat silent as if considering, and he repeated, "Why did you ask me that question?"

"Have you heard from her since?"

"No. Good Heavens! what are you trying to tell me, Aileen, is she—is she ill——"

"She is not ill."

"Are you certain? Do you want to break anything to me—is she dead——"

"She is not dead."

"Not ill, not dead!" he exclaimed, relieved, "then I defy your news, let it be what it will. But why do you speak of Caroline at all?"

"Because she——"

"Yes, because she—go on."

"Because she was married this morning."

She turned her head aside lest she should see his distress, but he caught her arm in such a grasp she was forced to raise her eyes.

"Who told you that poor jest?" he said, hoarsely.

"She did."

"Then of course it is a joke, not a good one, but still——"

"I thought, I hoped it might be what you say, but I went straight to the church——"

"What church?"

"St. Martin's-in-the-Fields, and there it was."

She heard his breath come and go, heard him pant heavily like one who has run fast and far. Not knowing what he did he rose, and she rose too and stood—silent.

"Who is the man," he asked, when he could speak.

"Mr. Parkyn."

"Mr. Parkyn," repeated Philip, dropping again on the seat and covering his face with his hands. "Mr. Parkyn."

Time went on, people passed and repassed, came into the Gardens and departed out of them, but still the man and woman did not stir. He had forgotten where he was, with whom he was, he knew of no companion save crushing grief, but at last he raised a white, haggard face, and said, "Will you leave me, please?" Then she went.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A LITTLE DINNER PARTY.

Backward and forward, to and fro, slowly swung the world's great pendulum, and it was again June, the June following that when Caroline Wilton weary, as she confessed, of a lover who did not care to inquire what "the odds were" or who was "favorite," or who had been "scratched," made utter shipwreck of her own life and well-nigh brought Philip Vernham to the grave.

He would have died but for Augustus Tripsdale, who never left his bedside till the fever had run its course, and who, when the doctor ordered change of air, carried him down to a quiet farm-house in Hampshire, not very far from the place where Aileen and Miss Simpson lived a peacefully quiet life, beloved and respected by rich and poor. At heart Gus was a matchmaker. He always said he made that match, which was true, though Philip never thought in those days of Aileen as a wife, only as the dearest, truest friend man ever found in trouble.

Indeed, many persons had enough to think about that summer without considering marrying or giving in marriage. It was a season when men's hearts failed them for fear, great houses fell with a crash, companies collapsed, people refused to invest and men grew suspicious, but through all the House of Desborne continued to do well, to attract fresh clients and please old ones, to pay its clerks and to hold its head higher than ever. It was during that summer Mr. Tripsdale made a great *coup*. He persuaded Miss Fermoy to withdraw ten thousand pounds worth of bonds from Mr.

Desborne's custody, and give them sealed up to Mr. Vernham, with a request that, even should she wish to have them back, he would refuse to gratify her desire till after the expiry of three years. Philip did not know what was in the parcel which he deposited among other papers with his bankers. For he had waxed exceedingly prosperous. A man cannot be lucky both in love and war, and as he had been eminently unlucky in love, it was only fair he should win in the commercial battle, and stand firm when many houses failed to do so.

Mr. Tripsdale felt very proud of his achievement, and walked home one especial Saturday with the air of a man possessed of more knowledge than the world could well contain, but he said nothing; true wisdom is ever chary of speech.

That same evening Mr. Desborne gave a dinner party. There were only gentlemen present—men he was anxious to cultivate; men he had too long neglected; men of weight in the city; men of mark, cast of The Griffin. It was a pleasant party, and as some of the guests talked well some of them listened well. There were few pauses in the conversation, and a second's lull sometimes makes after-talk all the pleasanter.

It was during one of these lulls that a sharp-looking city man, Mackill by name, who had been burning to start some topic all by himself, bethought him of a recent purchase and burst out with:

"By the way, Desborne, I bought a safe the other day—one of Tame's."

"A very good maker, I believe," said Mr. Desborne, politely.

"It was sent home this morning, so I think I may as well have those deeds of mine now. I will look in on Monday and take them away."

Mr. Desborne had lifted his wine-glass as the other began to speak, and did not answer till he set it down again, then, as he wiped his lips, he said:

"Don't call on Monday, because one of my clerks has managed to damage the lock of our safe. I sent for one of Chubbs's men this morning, but he says he can do nothing till Monday, and I can get at nothing before he puts us to right."

"Tuesday, then," said the other, and the matter dropped.

All that night Mr. Desborne lay awake. Sunday came and he went to church, where he preached a sermon to himself the while his rector was discoursing on a different text—for the end had come. The end always does, somehow, no matter how far distant it may once have seemed. It was but two years and a half since those bills fell due which were met, Mr. Tovey still wanted to know how, and what had not been thrown to the wolves since then. What, indeed? On Sunday night he slept as a man sleeps before his execution, in the still, small hours, when conscience is on the alert and comes creeping into darkened rooms and talks to wretched men. He awoke and remembered. He got up early, kissed his sleeping wife, went down-stairs, and made a feint of eating some breakfast.

He looked around the familiar room, he let his gaze wander over the lovely park and then passed out of the house. He went to Cloak Lane, read his letters, gave some instructions, and after saying he would be back at two o'clock walked through the clerks' office into the street. He did not return at two, or three, or even, in fact, until nearly four years had elapsed, when he appeared one day at a West End police office and said he wished to give himself up.

"For what?" asked the inspector.

"Embezzlement, I suppose you would call it. My name is Desborne."

Then the inspector remembered this was the man against whom there had been a warrant out for so long, the man there had been a lot of talk about, who had so successfully eluded justice.

"I will give you no trouble," he said, "make the business as short as you can."

His desire was gratified. He had only one remand, on his second appearance before the then Lord Mayor he was committed for trial at the Central Criminal Court. He bore up pretty well at first, but as time went on fell into a sullen mood and refused to speak.

"He takes it very badly now," said a communicative turnkey. "He carried it off when he came in, but then, no man knows what it is to be locked up till he tries it."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

CONCLUSION.

The court was not inconveniently crowded; the prisoner had been too long away, the story of his crime was too stale, a score and more of "interesting" cases had swayed the minds and tickled the ears of Londoners since that afternoon when rumors of Mr. Desborne's flight excited the city, less prone to be excited than the West End.

For in his way he was a notable man, a man much liked, a man much loved! Except some of those who lost money, very few found a hard word to say concerning him. In many cases the majority of city folk are very lenient. They knew the stress of the battle, the fierceness of the fight, the might of the temptation. Who better? Moreover, when one man loses no money through another it is easy to be merciful, and though Mr. Desborne's defalcations were heavy his creditors might have been "covered with a table cloth." Further, most working days there are in the Lord Mayor's kingdom such a number of bad, black goats that might with advantage be cast forth into that outer wilderness, where compassion would never think of following them, bearing on their backs all the sins of all lesser sinners, that when a comparatively unhardened offender goes wrong it might be wrong to deal out the same measure of social ostracism which the others deserve but often fail to receive. It was for this reason more men said, "Poor fellow," or "Poor devil," than "What a black-guard." He had fallen and people were sorry; others fail and people are glad.

Fashion did not affect the Old Bailey that morning when his case was to come on.

At the best, Mr. Desborne's had not been an interesting crime. A divorce, a scandal, an assault, an intrigue, would have roused fine ladies from sleep and brought them past the law courts, past the dragon, past the site of the old Fleet prison, into that inconvenient building hard by Newgate, where many a notable prisoner has listened to his death-sentence.

Thither they would have flocked, armed with opera-glasses and provided with sandwiches, but as "the man" had only taken money from other men and from a girl who was nobody, ladies proved happily conspicuous by their absence, and their vacant places were filled by barristers, solicitors, and a few business men who, having known the Desbornes, snatched a few moments in order to hear what Mr. Burbury, Q. C., would say in mitigation of sentence.

For it was indeed that great legal luminary who had been retained for the prisoner by Mrs. Vernham—so said those who were supposed to be behind the scenes—whose unfaltering loyalty to the man who had robbed her was the theme of all tongues. Faithful friendship must surely be a most uncommon product of our civilization, to judge from the admiration it excited on the rare occasions when exhibited.

Poor Aileen! she had always been unfashionable and unconventional, and in this latest departure the world felt she had surpassed herself. There were she and Mr. Vernham sitting in the body of the court, Mr. Birdlow was there and Mr. Mackill also.

Besides these principal characters in the sad little drama many a supernumerary found standing room in the small court; Mr. Knyvitt, grown stout and arrogant; Mr. Tripsdale, improved and subdued by the honors which had been thrust upon him in many recent cases, notably that of *Darcy v. Fluke* and *Regina v. Printon*. He had climbed the hill of legal fame very

rapidly, and his name was much dreaded by gentry who had anything to conceal.

"He was down on them like a custom-house officer," to quote Mr. Packle's admiring phrase. He had an unerring instinct which enabled him to lay his finger on the weak spot. There was but one person he could not impress—Polly, now Mrs. Reginald Tripsdale, in whom familiarity had bred contempt. "Don't talk to me," she was wont to say, and Mr. Tripsdale did not. His rôle in married life was to listen to her.

Gus was there also, but not sketching. He would have liked to tear his pencil away from the man who he saw was "doing" Mr. and Mrs. Vernham for "The Hourly Indicator," a very successful "half-penny hit," just started. The Judge was there, looking like Fate. Off the bench a kinder or more genial soul never existed, but on it he knew no fear nor favor.

"Let justice be done though the Heavens should fall," might have been his motto, so well did he act up to it.

Justice was his war cry, the faith which inspired, the word which compelled him.

Had his first born, or the wife of his bosom, or the white-haired man, his father, come before him, he would have dealt out even-handed justice, and never permitted the scales he held to tremble toward the side of mercy.

Mr. Desborne had known him well in the old days. It was only since his misfortune, shall we say, which Judge Merrier would have called a different name, that by an irony of fate his former friend had been raised to the bench.

There was an instant's pause, then, as if by one consent, every head turned toward the dock. No, not every head; Philip Vernham kept his eyes fixed on the window, while Aileen looked resolutely at the floor. She knew who had come to face his disgrace, a pain like that of death thrilled through her, then she glanced at the place where he stood pale, white-haired, and impassive.

She forced her lips to smile, but he gave no sign in return. There were friends all around him, even the warders had been moved to sympathy. Many a face softened at sight of the change a few years had wrought, but the man himself betrayed no emotion. It was as Philip had been told. Alone of all in that court, the person most concerned remained unmoved; over his once mobile features a mask seemed drawn. He was utterly impassive. He did not seem to feel his position; he did not look at any thing or any person. When the jailor touched him he moved, but of his own accord he did nothing; a statue could not have evidenced greater indifference to the proceedings than he.

And yet it was not like indifference. It seemed more as though the long anguish had stupefied him and made that supreme moment, when he was brought forward in the sight of men to answer for his crime, appear of as slight consequence, as though he were under the influence of some narcotic.

When asked to plead he could with difficulty be made to understand what was required, and when at last he was induced to answer, it was in so low a tone the constable beside him had to repeat the word "guilty," for the edification of the court.

Then Mr. Belford, instructed by the Solicitor to the Treasury, rose and began his statement, which was a very temperate one. He did not rave about the matter, or aught set down in malice, but he told the truth, and the truth was very bad indeed. He spoke of the firm, so long trusted, so highly thought of that the word of a Desborne would by many have been more readily believed than the oath of other men. Clients left their title deeds and securities with them, and felt they were as safe as in the strong room of the Bank of England. As a rule, clients did repose this unbounded confidence in their solicitors, and he thanked God that, as a rule, solicitors proved themselves worthy of this generous confidence. It would

be a sad day for England, it would be a disastrous day for the members of an honorable profession, when men felt they could no longer regard their honesty as above suspicion, and the worst feature in this truly lamentable case is the slur cast by the unhappy prisoner in the dock on the profession of which he was once a distinguished member. "Although," he went on "the conduct of the prisoner more resembled that of a lunatic than any course ordinarily pursued by a rational being, there is not the slightest doubt but that during the whole time when he was appropriating other persons' moneys to his own use he was in perfect possession of his faculties. He used all means to avert discovery; he replaced one security with another in the cleverest manner; he attended to his proper business, and turned a good face to the world all the time he was acting the part of a common thief, and it was only when the game was played out to the last card, and detection became unavoidable, that he absconded, leaving his dupes to find out for themselves the extent of the ruin he had wrought. There is no desire, I understand, on the part of any of those who have lost heavily to act vindictively; but, in the interests of justice, if the law is not to become a dead letter, if a high standard is to be maintained in the profession Edward Desborne has disgraced, I feel bound to press for an exemplary sentence, such a sentence as may serve to warn others breach of trust is a crime of so deadly and dangerous a nature that it must be punished with severity."

"What is the total amount of the deficiency, Mr. Belford?" asked Mr. Justice Merrier.

"Over one hundred thousand pounds, my Lord," at which there was a little stir in court as when a light wind rustles the leaves. Every one had known the amount before, but it sounded different, somehow, in that cold, legal atmosphere.

Then up rose the great Burbury, Q. C., who was personally a burly man, possessed of an eye, voice, and

manner calculated to inspire evil-doers with dread, and to wring the very hearts out of reluctant witnesses. No one knew better than he there was not in the case a "leg left to stand on." No one could be more fully aware than himself, that he might as well discourse to the winds as talk sentiment to Mr. Justice Merrier. He would cheerfully have given five times the fee, which, though a chronically impecunious man, he had refused to accept, if it could only have fallen to his lot to address a jury instead of "that figurehead of fate," as he mentally styled His Lordship.

What could he not have done with a jury? He would have conjured up the ghosts of departed mothers, the sweet faces of living wives, the pictures of innocent children; he would have made wrong seem right, he would have spoken to them about their hearths and homes, he would have talked to them about the Great Day of Judgment, he would have appealed from Earth to Heaven, he would have adjured them to be merciful as they hoped for mercy, but, knowing all this was impossible, he said that although well aware excuse was impossible he would venture to put a few facts before his Lordship, in order to prove Edward Desborne was not deserving of all the hard things his learned friends had said about him.

"It was unnecessary," he began, "to refer more particularly to the firm of Desborne, because every one who knew the city knew how unimpeachable the character of that firm had been."

From generation to generation, from father to son, that character had been handed down a precious possession. It was reserved for Edward Desborne, the brightest, the most gifted, the most lovable, the most honorable, as at one time men who knew him best would have said and said rightly, of all his race to take the first step from virtue. He, the speaker, had known the unhappy prisoner since he was a boy. He remembered well the hopes which clustered around him, he recollected the handsome lad when he brought home his

first prizes. Ah ! who would have thought that he would ever be arraigned as a felon ? I'm not the person who ought to have been entrusted with this painful task," he said, "because Edward Desborne was ever too near and dear to me to permit of my discharging so hard a duty in a fitting manner. My feelings overpower me, my Lord. I am now pleading, not as a counsel for an erring client, but as a father for a son of whom he was once only too proud. I was proud and fond of him, and I am fond of him still. There are some who never can succeed in estranging our affections. I believe there are many in court who, spite of all, would say they love him still." Here emotion choked Mr. Burbury, and the pause he made was effectively filled by a low sob, which Aileen vainly tried to smother.

That helped counsel mightily. Without further check he told of Edward Desborne's kindness. Who ever went to him for help and came away empty ? The high, the low, the rich, the poor were in some sort all his debtors. "Time would fail me to tell of what he was. Judge, my Lord, of what it must be to such a man to be what he is. I need not remind any one present of the old proverb which tells us 'easy is the slope to Hell.' This man—weak, amiable, hopeful, found that slope only too easy. His was the old, old story. He never meant to do wrong, but he did wrong ; he intended to replace, he could not replace. The whole trouble began with a comparatively small amount of debt. It is a way trouble very often begins, as many persons know only too well.

"In order to relieve himself of embarrassment Mr. Desborne applied to a gentlemen in the habit of lending money, who advanced a sum sufficient to meet those pressing liabilities. When the acceptances given in exchange fell due, the required amount was not in the acceptor's possession, a circumstance so usual that I really ought to apologize for mentioning it.

"The drawer of those bills is in court, and would tell

you if Mr. Desborne had only gone to him, all anxiety might have been avoided. Unfortunately, Mr. Desborne did not go to him ; that also is the usual thing—somehow debtors never do go. It is the same with all troubles, physical, financial, mental, and moral—the sufferer never will speak. Mr. Desborne did not speak, instead, he used, intending to make good, money belonging to a client, money which at the moment was lying idle.”

From that point Mr. Burbury found what he had to say plain sailing. He told how Mr. Thomas Desborne, always supposed to be a sort of millionaire, died, leaving only a few thousands ; how Mr. Desborne tried to retrieve his shattered fortunes by speculating, unhappily, but with his own money ; how he at first proved successful ; how the tide turned ; how he fell among thieves ; how the more he lost the more desperately he staked ; how he made good one security by pledging another ; how he mortgaged title deeds to redeem bonds and sold bonds to complete purchases. It was a terrible story, to which Mr. Desborne listened unmoved, his face not even softening when counsel told the beautiful tale of woman’s forgiveness and generosity, and said Aileen, who had lost seventy thousand pounds, was in court that day, not to ask for revenge, but to plead for leniency. No one felt vindictively toward this stricken man. “Oh ! my Lord, will you not, remembering what he has suffered, what he must suffer, temper justice with mercy and inflict such a sentence as, while marking your sense of his guilt, may not totally deprive him of the power of making amends for the past, and proving the sincerity of his repentance in the future ?”

Mr. Burbury sat down, and Mr. Justice Merrier spoke. In two minutes he had brushed away all the learned counsel took such pains to hang about a “very simple matter.” In his, the Judge’s, opinion all the plans put forward in extenuation of his crime were aggravations of it. He was not an ignorant man, he had

not been brought up among those who entertained lax notions on the subject of honesty. If education were of any use, if talent, culture, an honorable family record were things of any avail, he was bound to be commonly honest, and he had proved himself to be extraordinarily dishonest. Still he, the Judge, did not desire to disregard the strong appeal for mercy which had been made. He remembered that he had surrendered of his own free will, that the principal sufferer refused to prosecute, that imprisonment to a man of his antecedents meant much more than it could to one differently brought up, and though he had the power to inflict twenty years' penal servitude, he thought the justice of the case would be met by a lighter sentence. "You will therefore," he went on, "be imprisoned for five years at hard labor."

And then a wonderful, an unprecedented thing happened. While the Judge was speaking a ray of light seemed to come on the prisoner's face, lighting it up with a sort of wintry sunshine. His features relaxed, the impassiveness of his attitude and expression changed, he gazed at the bench eagerly, as one who hears from a distance the sound of a familiar voice, and as the last word of the sentence died away the string of his tongue was loosed and, throwing his arms over the front of the dock, he cried :

"Ah ! Merrier, and how are you ? I did not know you, really I did not. And you too, Burbury, and you Morton, why, all my old friends are here. Come and dine with me ; do, fix your own day. I have not been very well for some little time, but it makes me so glad to see your familiar faces again," and so he ran on like a watch in which the spring is broken while every one in court, from the Judge downward, looked aghast, and even the warders seemed scarcely to know what ought to be done. As they strove to remove him, the unfortunate man clung to the dock, babbling, babbling, babbling on. At his first words Aileen had risen, then, in spite of her husband's restraining touch, stepped to

the dock. She did not remember the Judge, she did not see the barristers or officials or spectators—she only saw Edward Desborne, sentenced by man, stricken by God.

“Aileen, my good Aileen, is it really you?” he said joyously, holding out his hands to grasp hers.

“Yes, I am here,” she answered, glancing at the warders, “and I want you to do something for me. I cannot tell you what it is here, but if you go with those gentlemen I will meet you at the other side.”

“Yes, the lady will meet you,” said the jailor, taking his arm and leading him away.

That was the last most of those present ever saw of the Head of the Firm. There are a few though, now and then, who journey down into Hampshire to pay sad visits to a prematurely old man, who walks over the Downs with Miss Simpson, or rambles about the lawn and gardens with Aileen and her children. Not an unhappy man, but one who delights in the blue sky and the green trees and flowers and birds in summer and winter, seed time and harvest, frost and snow. At intervals, however, he wanders away to some high place and looks long and earnestly into the far distance, as if he saw there his lost reason which can return to him nevermore.

THE END.

THE HEAD OF THE FIRM

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